



# THE Nation.

MARCH 7/14, 2022

**THE  
TAKING OF  
BLACK LAND**  
ELIE MYSTAL

**THE  
VERTIGO OF  
TRANSLATION**  
ILAN STAVANS

*by Jennifer Berkshire*

## **Why Teachers Are Dropping Out**

Covid and the culture wars have turned an exodus of teachers into an emergency.

IT **COULD** HAPPEN HERE  
IT *is* *Happening* HERE



**S**upreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun warned years ago that a ban on abortion would “cast in darkness the hope of every woman in this country.”

That darkness approaches as the Supreme Court — with its super-majority of extremists — is poised to overturn or nullify *Roe v. Wade* and its recognition of the vital right “to be free from unwarranted governmental intrusion into matters so fundamentally affecting a person as the decision whether to bear or beget a child.”

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**Road warrior:**  
A truck displaying flags in support of the anti-vaccine-mandate protest in Coutts, Alberta, on February 2.



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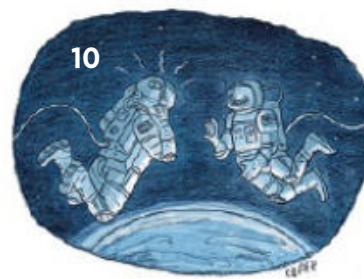


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EDITORIAL / JAMES K. GALBRAITH FOR THE NATION

# How Should the Left Think About Inflation?

**I**N STATING RECENTLY THAT “INFLATION IS THE FED’S JOB,” PRESIDENT BIDEN gave compact expression to three radically false and politically suicidal propositions: 1. The past year’s price increases are part of a process that must be suppressed. 2. Anti-inflation policies are the preserve of the central bank. 3. The Federal Reserve can suppress inflation without also wrecking the economy, the president’s own program, his party, and his political prospects.

Let me offer three counter-propositions: 1. There is no compelling reason to raise interest rates, now or later. 2. Nevertheless, future price pressures are inevitable. 3. A progressive anti-inflation strategy is possible and necessary—one that supports jobs and living standards and doesn’t involve the Federal Reserve.

Why have prices risen this year? First of all, because world oil prices jumped in the spring of 2021, while supply chain troubles hit new car production and drove up used-car prices. Those were the big items. They were onetime hits, in the case of oil largely over by July, which make new headlines every month only because the government reports price changes 12 months later. Though some effects will linger, these big shifts will drop from the news reports automatically as 2022 moves along.

Wages are also rising, finally—a bit. Since most American jobs are in services, those wages are also prices. And they are prices that are paid—this should be an obvious point—by people wealthier than those who are getting paid. Suppressing wage increases for low-wage American workers is reactionary. And it’s a result that can be achieved only by gouging those workers and their families on their debts and then cutting off their bargaining power over their jobs.

There are other things going on, including higher rents and meat prices. But in the main, the “inflation” we’ve already seen is either plainly transitory, as in the case of oil or autos, or good news, as in the case of wages. Neither justifies a policy of higher interest rates. Not now, and not for years from now, until after the next presidential election.

Why can’t the Federal Reserve hold the line without hurting workers? Because to keep to any given inflation target—2 percent per year, say, as the Fed would prefer—when some prices are rising by much more than that, means that some other prices must rise much less, or even fall. What other prices are there? In a service economy, it’s mainly wages. But to cut back wages, you need recession and mass unemployment. Want to know how that works politically? Ask Jimmy Carter.

The idea that the Federal Reserve can (somehow) bring down

inflation without cost is backed by nonsense and non-thought. Milton Friedman’s old slogan “Inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon” demonstrates how far economic thought can depart from reality. There is a notion that “labor markets” somehow adjust on their own to preserve full employment. There is a claim that the Covid stimulus programs were too big and that the economy is running “too hot.” All of it is false, which becomes obvious once you realize there are 2 million fewer jobs in America now than there were in 2019, when there was no inflation to speak of. Obviously we’re running into structural changes induced

by the pandemic, some of which cannot be reversed and some of which should not be reversed, but none of which the Fed can just wave away by pushing up interest rates.

And more and bigger structural changes are coming, whether we like them

or not. Most important, the United States no longer runs the world. We must move away—quickly, before any new disasters occur—from failed efforts to preserve a military and financial domination that we cannot maintain. Second, we must move away from fossil fuels. Third, the pandemic showed that we must move away from the global supply chain—not everywhere, but in some critical areas, restoring domestic manufacturing capacity to meet emergencies. Each of these coming transitions will generate pressures on the price level. And the argument just made will again apply: Some price increases should be accepted, and some should be managed, as

**To cut back wages, you need mass unemployment. Want to know how that works politically? Ask Jimmy Carter.**

best we can, with policies that keep things under control and share the burdens.

What are those policies? They include large investments in infrastructure, mass transit, housing, and rebuilding cities; action on climate change; and legislation for higher minimum wages and guaranteed jobs. Once again, all of these efforts will tend to push up prices, at first. That's because they generate incomes that cannot be spent immediately on more consumer goods, barring what economists call "a perfectly elastic supply"—meaning more goods from China at no extra cost, flowing in smoothly over the supply chain. Forget about that. Instead, we can assume that consumers will buy houses, used cars, and other fixed assets, driving those prices up—and those purchases will register, directly or indirectly, in the price index.

How should we handle those pressures? First, by making resources available that we're now wasting. Above all, we should demilitarize and redirect those valuable materials, skills, and personnel to tackle the big investments we need here at home. Reckless war policies, pursued for 20 years, have already ended the global dominance we once enjoyed—Iraq, Afghanistan, and now the situation in Ukraine are proof. The only way out of this decline is to get busy and rebuild on the home front. That, by the way, is what Germany, Japan, Korea, and China have all done—and exactly why they are the top or rising economic powers while we are the declining one.

Second, the US should definancialize. Since the time of Reagan, the American economy has ridden waves of speculation—in real estate, in information technology, in mortgages, and now in real estate once again—each leading to a bust. Here the way out is twofold. First, break up or take over the large banks, restore effective regulation, and create a public banking system that serves a public purpose—as France did following the Second World War. Second, heavily tax speculative assets, including land, mineral rights, and so-called intellectual property, bringing our oligarchs back to earth and lowering taxes on working people, consumers, and ordinary business profits. This will deflate the plutonomy—that part of the consumer economy driven by the excesses of the very rich. Want to call this "socialism?" Go ahead.

Third, control health care costs. How? By enacting Medicare for All, including the power of a government purchaser to negotiate drug prices. Medicare for All is a system of strategic price control aimed at a critical sector; it is potentially the most powerful anti-inflationary tool the government has.

Fourth, control rents. Since all locations are unique, rental housing is by nature a form of market power. And while landlords do deserve a fair return, renters also deserve a fair deal. Rent control, managed by community boards, is the way to achieve this and to keep housing costs down.

Finally, use selective price controls to stop price gouging. Inflation is always aggravated by bad actors who abuse their market power

to profiteer. Against this, the best weapon is the empowered consumer, informed and organized. The greatest experiment in economic democracy ever attempted, the Office of Price Administration under Chester Bowles from 1943 through 1945, deployed over 300,000 civilian volunteers to keep prices in check. The OPA was hated by business and was abolished in 1946, precisely because it was a countervailing power that actually worked.

**The left must face up to inflation because we must be realistic and ready for what's coming next.**

The left must take inflation seriously—but not because what has already happened is such a big deal. And not because we face the kind of hyperinflation that boosted the Nazis or led to collapse in Zimbabwe. And especially not by nodding along with the tired ideologues

who have dominated the economics textbooks, the financial press, and central bank policies since the era of Reagan and Volcker.

The left must face up to inflation because we must be realistic and ready for what's coming next.

Progressives should not pretend that our challenges will be met by magic or for free, leaving prices unaffected. Fading American global power, rising resource costs, the energy transition, and the climate crisis—as well as most of the investments and job policies we favor to respond to these changes—will put pressure on the price level. The "inflation" to come is just a condensed re-

reflection of this reality. And the idea that "inflation is the Fed's job" is just a way of denying that reality while dumping the unavoidable costs of adjustment onto American workers, their families, the indebted, and the poor.

If the left stands for anything, it should stand for a better way. **N**



Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell

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COMMENT / OMAR BARGHOUTI AND  
STEFANIE FOX

# Amnesty's Echo

*Amnesty International's report confirming Israel as an apartheid state could be a turning point—but it's up to us.*



IN FEBRUARY 1, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL RELEASED a meticulously researched report detailing the objective reality of Israel's decades-old system of apartheid, which treats Palestinians as an "inferior non-Jewish racial group." Even before the official release, the Israeli government was vilifying and slandering Amnesty in a desperate attempt to torpedo the damning report. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid summarized the strategic concern that is haunting his government: "Calling Israel an apartheid state was a slowly creeping trend for a very long time, and in 2022, it will be a real threat."

Lapid is right about this tipping-point moment. And yet, while the report may be a game changer given Amnesty's size and influence, its main conclusion is no surprise. The United Nations, as well as Palestinian and South African leaders and human rights groups, have been saying the same thing for years. Last year, Israel's leading human rights organization, B'tselem, published a report titled "A Regime of Jewish Supremacy From the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid," which was followed by yet another report, by Human Rights Watch, accusing Israel of perpetrating apartheid.

Why does the growing consensus calling a regime of racial supremacy and domination by its proper legal term rattle the Israeli establishment so much? Because apartheid is a crime against humanity.

This means we all must play a role in dismantling this oppressive system by challenging all forms of complicity in maintaining it. Crucially, we not only know how to do so—we're already doing it.

The two of us write as a Palestinian living under and challenging Israeli apartheid, and as an American Jew who has spent decades fighting it. We are both active in the Palestinian-led, nonviolent, and inclusive Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which has played a leading role, since its launch in 2005, in raising awareness about Israeli apartheid and effectively advocating for targeted, lawful sanctions to dismantle it—the same tactics that were used against apartheid in South Africa. This advocacy has gained significant traction since 2020, in the aftermath of Israel's plans to officially annex major swaths of the occupied Palestinian territory.

In its report, Amnesty rightly addresses the responsibility of states that buttress Israel's apartheid regime "by supplying it with arms, equipment and other tools to perpetrate crimes under international law and by providing diplomatic cover, including at the UN Security Council, to shield it from accountability." No state is as complicit in enabling, arming, funding, and shielding Israeli apartheid as the United States, with its annual military funding of \$3.8 billion and countless vetoes at the United Nations to prevent holding Israel accountable for its grave violations of Palestinian rights.

As the late South African anti-apartheid hero Desmond Tutu once

said, the US places Israel "on a pedestal," above censure and accountability. The BDS movement is campaigning to remove Israel from this pedestal so that it can be judged and treated according to the same universal principles of human rights and international law that apply elsewhere. As taxpayers who fund 20 percent of the Israeli military budget and whose elected officials have secured Israeli impunity for decades on end, Americans have the opportunity and obligation to refuse this business-as-usual, and to demand accountability rather than complicity.

We know for a fact that a growing portion of Americans want to do exactly that. A plurality of Americans, including a majority of Democrats, support sanctions or stronger action against Israel over its illegal settlements. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Jewish Americans share this conviction. In 2021, a survey by the Jewish Electoral Institute showed that a quarter of Jewish Americans believed that Israel is an apartheid state, while nearly 60 percent supported

restricting aid to Israel so that it can't be used to expand settlements.

In the past year, we witnessed unprecedented global solidarity, with Palestinians asserting their right to freedom, justice, and equality and struggling against Israel's policy of violent dispossession of Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem and the Al-Naqab (Negev desert), as well as its siege and brutal assault

on Gaza. Support for BDS as the most meaningful form of this solidarity has grown considerably.

Thousands of cultural workers support the institutional academic and cultural boycott of Israel. Economic activism has led major corporations to abandon projects that are implicated in Israel's system of oppression against Palestinians. Mainline US churches and massive sovereign funds in Europe are divesting from companies that benefit from Israel's occupation.

And all this was before Amnesty's report.

Ultimately, Israel's wrath at Amnesty for daring to release its study reflects that it now sees the same writing on the wall that Palestinians and the many millions worldwide who support their inherent right to freedom, justice, and equality have seen for years: Israel's South Africa moment is nearing. **N**

*Omar Barghouti is a Palestinian human rights defender. Stefanie Fox is executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace.*

## Back Talk Alexis Grenell



# Stormy's Integrity

*The pornographic actress was telling the truth all along. So why did she fail in a court of law?*

**F**OUR YEARS AFTER SHE SUED DONALD TRUMP FOR defamation, the pornographic actress and director Stormy Daniels has finally been vindicated. A judge may have rejected her claims at the time, but she emerged the clear winner in the court of public opinion in 2021 the second that Trump's fixer Michael Cohen admitted to—and apologized for—paying her off to keep quiet about her 2006 sexual encounter with the former president. And now her former lawyer Michael Avenatti, after already being convicted by federal prosecutors for trying to shake down Nike, has been found guilty of stealing a portion of her book advance and lying to her about it. But even though she remains something of a folk hero for “the Resistance,” Daniels still hasn't gotten the respect she deserves under the law. It's disturbing to consider what this says about who is afforded legal protections—and who we can slander without consequences. It's the problem of womanhood made manifest in the hyperbole of whoredom.

When Daniels sued Trump in 2018, it was for calling her a liar on Twitter over her claim that he'd sent a thug to threaten her into silence. “A total con job, playing the Fake News Media for Fools (but they know it!)” he tweeted on April 18.

Trump countersued her under Texas's anti-SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) statute, which is intended to protect the speech of average people from frivolous lawsuits designed to intimidate them. As CNN's Chris Cillizza observed at the time, “Trump on Twitter is simply using his massive bullhorn—51 million people strong—to suggest that a woman is making up a story about being harassed.” Implicitly incriminating their client, Trump's lawyers argued that Daniels could not claim harm because, as an adult entertainer, “there is nothing about Plaintiff's career (SIC) that requires a reputation for honesty.” They also listed the titles of some of her pornographic movies, juxtaposed against Trump's title as president. The implication was clear: How can a woman who has sex on camera claim any reputational damage that she hasn't already done to herself? The carve-out for sex workers under New York's rape shield law functions essentially the same way: A woman who has been raped cannot be asked at trial about her unrelated sexual history—unless she has sex for money. Then she's no longer a victim, but effectively a slut who can't be raped.

The judge ruled against Daniels, but not necessarily because he thought she could not be defamed, and not because he thought her allegations against Trump weren't verifiable (an essential element in proving defamation). Instead, he determined that Trump's lie was protected speech because it was merely “rhetorical hyperbole which has traditionally added much to the discourse of the United States.” Absurdly, he also defined Daniels as a “political adversary,” citing as precedent a case in which a candidate for the Texas Senate unsuccessfully sued his opponent for defamation, as the court found the attack ad materials insufficiently defamatory in the context of a rhetorically charged campaign. By this logic, the president of the United States and a previously obscure pornographic actress were equals in the public arena. Therefore, the judge reasoned, Daniels had failed to meet the burden of proof for showing that Trump tweeted with “actual malice,” and, furthermore, holding him to account for the lie “would significantly hamper the office of the President.”

By speaking up and refusing to be slandered as a liar by the president, Daniels apparently disqualified herself from personhood, becoming a political actor, thus entitling her to less protection.

It's an all-too-familiar dynamic we see playing out today when women (and some men) speak publicly about misconduct or abuse. Like Daniels, they can expect to be branded as liars, lacking credibility, character, or standing. This outspoken pornographic actress exemplifies the problem Mary Beard identified in her 2014 essay “The Public Voice of Women”: “A woman should as modestly guard against exposing her voice to outsiders as she would guard against stripping off her clothes.”

The act of using one's voice transforms any woman into a whore. That means it's open season to attack you, limit your speech, and punish you for opening your mouth in the first place. Five years after #MeToo erupted, we're seeing fresh examples of all three. The ex-governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, has been having a months-long media tantrum aimed at impugning the integrity of his victims. From digging up one woman's college records (supposedly to prove a pattern of targeting men) to trying to distract from the facts of his own case by waving around contested testimony that another of his accusers engaged in sexual acts with her direct boss, it's been a nonstop barrage of character assassination. And in January the University of Michigan agreed to pay \$490 million to

**Stormy Daniels  
exemplifies the problem  
of womanhood made  
manifest in the  
hyperbole of whoredom.**

settle a case involving 1,000 people who were sexually abused by a now-deceased doctor, muzzling them with a clause to cease their political advocacy. Despite flattering the university for finally doing right by the victims, the settlement prohibits them from advocating for two bills being considered by the Michigan Legislature that would make it easier for other victims to sue the university.

**In New York, a raped woman cannot be asked at trial about her sexual history—unless she has sex for money.**

Silence is literally the price for speaking up. It's why Felicia Sonmez, a *Washington Post* reporter, is suing her employer. When she disclosed to her bosses that she had been sexually assaulted, the paper barred her from covering stories of sexual violence—such as the Brett Kavanaugh hearings—because of

her supposed bias. Her professional punishment was rescinded after a public outcry, but it was part and parcel of how abusers like Cuomo and Trump portray their accusers as untrustworthy.

I asked Daniels to comment on this column, but she said she couldn't until after the Avenatti trial concluded, presumably so as not to jeopardize her integrity as a witness. She made one appearance on CNN—which Avenatti then tried to use as grounds for a mistrial—where she spoke to his attacks on her credibility, given her profession: "It basically is free license to commit crimes against us and get away with it, and that's really terrifying." **N**



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## Morbid Symptoms Jeet Heer



### MAGA Goes Magyar

*The American right from Franco to Orbán.*

**W**AY BACK IN THE 1970S, DURING THE FIRST SEASON OF *Saturday Night Live*, Chevy Chase played a newscaster who, week after week, breathlessly announced, "The top story of the night: Generalissimo Francisco Franco is still dead!" Reminders of Franco's demise unfailingly elicited laughter. But not all Americans were delighted to see the fascist dictator reduced to the butt of a recurring joke.

In the offices of *National Review*, Franco's death was an occasion for mourning. The flagship journal of the American right published two somber obituaries. James Burnham, a founding editor, extolled Franco as "our century's most successful ruler" and a man possessed of "a patient stubbornness, a flawless prudence, and an unshakable faith in his mission."

Burnham wrote as a hard-nosed Cold Warrior who appreciated Franco's services in fending off communism. Reid Buckley, brother of the magazine's editor, William F. Buckley Jr., took a more romantic view of the dictator's embodiment of Catholic traditionalism. For him, Franco was "a Spaniard out of the heroic annals of the nation, a giant. He will be truly mourned by Spain because with all his heart and might and soul, he loved his country, and in the vast context of Spanish history, did well by it."

I was reminded of these lofty words celebrating a blood-soaked tyrant while reading an astute essay by the historian Joshua Tait in *The Bulwark* comparing the American right's onetime passion for Franco to its contemporary passion for the Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orbán. Budapest, astonishingly, has become a mecca for the American right over the past few years; major intellectuals like Christopher Caldwell, John O'Sullivan, and Rod Dreher have made pilgrimages to Orbán's domain. They speak of Hungary with the zeal of converts who have had a vision of Heaven.

Compared with Orbán, even Donald Trump seems pusillanimous. No wonder Tucker Carlson has repeatedly used his Fox News show to spread the good news of Hungarian authoritarianism. In early August of 2021, Carlson filmed a week of his show in Hungary and told his audience, "If you care about Western civilization and democracy and families and the ferocious assault on all three of those things by the leaders of our global institutions, you should know what is happening here right now." In January 2022, Fox Nation aired a "documentary" by Carlson titled *Hungary vs. Soros: The Fight for Civilization*.

Orbán, his right-wing fans gush, has rolled back LGBTQ rights, he's kept out refugees, he's cowed the media, he's raised the native birthrate, he's made liberal philanthropist George Soros into a national hate figure, he's gerrymandered the electoral system, and he's packed the courts. The right might be losing the cultural war in America, but Hungary offers a model for anti-liberal politics that not only wins elections but has shown how to use the strong arm of the state to enforce its will.



# The Invention of the Year

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***–Kent C., California***

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The Zinger folds to a mere 10 inches.

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As Tait notes, “For American national conservatives already abandoning small-government positions, Orbán fuels dreams of an American right brandishing the power of the federal government. Others may see in Hungary a hint of ‘integralism’—the possibility of a Christian state integrated under the governance of the Catholic Church.”

Tait draws some telling parallels between the fascist fellow travelers of the Cold War and their 21st-century counterparts: “As with the current relationship with Hungary, the conservative experience of Spain was characterized by celebrations of the Nationalist victory against leftist ‘aggression,’ anti-anti-Franco apologia, and rethinking conservative dogmas in the shade of Spanish cathedrals.”

The example of Franco and the more traditionalist Spanish monarchist movement known as Carlism encouraged *National Review* writers like L. Brent Bozell Jr. to jettison the anti-statist constraints of classical Anglo-American liberalism. Bozell dreamed of a more energetic and authoritarian state, one not afraid to impose Christian notions of virtue on a recalcitrant population. It’s perhaps no accident that Bozell would become a pioneer in the fomenting of violence to end reproductive freedom. In the early 1970s, he created a Carlist group called the Sons of Thunder that harassed abortion clinics.

Just as Franco inspired Bozell to indulge in bigger dreams,

**Right-wing intellectuals speak of Hungary with the zeal of converts who have had a vision of Heaven.**

so the current cult of Orbán is helping to radicalize the American right. Carlson’s *Hungary vs. Soros* is a prime example. Like any wealthy person who takes strong political stands, Soros deserves scrutiny and criticism. But Carlson goes beyond policy objections to Soros by presenting a thinly veiled version of the anti-Semitic myth of Judeo-Bolshevism. Soros, according to Carlson, is a puppet master who is encouraging immigration with the intent of undermining traditional Western civilization.

While drawing parallels between the past and present, Tait notes that the *National Review* “intellectuals were never as close to Franco as contemporary conservatives are to Orbán.”

There’s every reason to think the Orbán cult can have a much bigger impact than Franco’s fandom had. Bozell and others traveled to Spain and idealized it—but they had few interactions with the Spanish state. Orbán’s regime, by contrast, has been working zealously to cultivate American allies, financing think tanks like the Danube Institute and publications like the *Hungarian Conservative*. This slick magazine is surprisingly easy to find on anglophone newsstands. I myself bought an issue in Regina, Saskatchewan; others have spotted copies in New York and London.

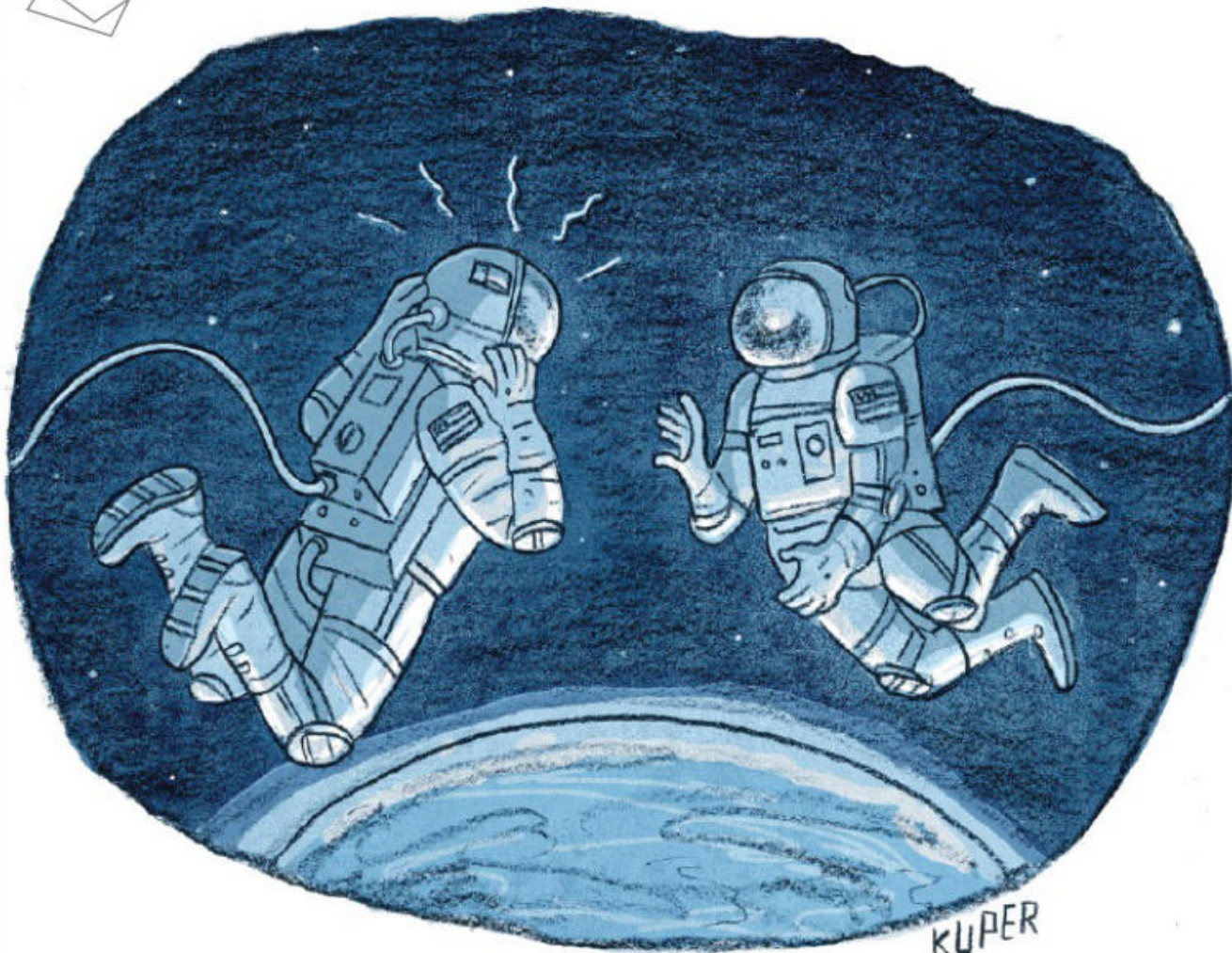
The *National Review* intellectuals, aside from William F. Buckley, rarely reached a mass audience. Carlson, by contrast, has the most watched news show on cable television.

Pro-Franco thinkers tended to be Catholic. Orbán, a Protestant, has a more ecumenical American following. In 2017, he hosted a meeting of the World Congress of Families, a leading evangelical group that promotes traditionalist family values and pushes to restrict LGBTQ rights.

The romance of Francoism became moot when Spain underwent a democratic revolution after the dictator’s death. Reid Buckley and Brent Bozell were building sand castles quickly washed away by history. Orbán, who is facing rising opposition in his own country, might prove equally transient. What is more likely to last, however, is a recalcitrant right in both Hungary and the United States—one so fearful of modernity that it is willing to openly embrace authoritarianism.

Francisco Franco is still dead, and Orbán might eventually be out of office, but the desire for a strongman to defeat the left will remain. **N**

OPPART / PETER KUPER



“I’ve had it with the helmet mandates.”

# Q&A

## Anny Gaul and Antonio Tahhan

*Making Levantine Cuisine*, a new collection of essays published by the University of Texas Press, argues that food and the fiery debates around it can shed light on histories of inequality and struggle in the region.

By examining the food history, culture, and politics of the modern Levant, the authors reveal a culinary past that is, as one contributor puts it, “simultaneously hidden and deliciously obvious.” I spoke with Anny Gaul, an assistant professor of Arabic studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, and one of the editors of the book, and Antonio Tahhan, a food writer, researcher, and contributor to it. —Alexia Underwood

**AU: There’s been much debate over whom food “belongs to,” especially a food like hummus. You write that it’s a question of privilege. How so?**

**AG:** Privilege and power. Sometimes what’s lost in the conversations about ownership or appropriation are these questions of concrete, tangible forms of power. Instead of asking who owns something, can we shift the question to “Who has the opportunity to benefit from it?” So in an immediate sense, the question is “Who is profiting from the sale of hummus or falafel, and what are the conditions that allow them to set up restaurants or companies that let them profit?”

**AT:** Also, I’d like to point out how reductive national identities are in describing food. Food is not restricted by any sort of arbitrarily constructed national border—food is more regional than anything else.

**AU: You wrote an essay, Antonio, about preparing food with your Syrian grandmother in Caracas, Venezuela. How does this broaden our understanding of food in the region?**

**AT:** I was born in Venezuela, and I lived there until I was 4 [when we moved to the US]. We would go back every summer. A lot of this food is very labor- and time-intensive. My mom doesn’t share the same passion for cooking that I do, but when we moved to the States, she felt the responsibility to re-create all these dishes, and for her it was a chore. Sitting down and rolling a pot of grape leaves by yourself is almost torture.

Somebody asked me once about this romanticization of the cuisine of the region. However, I think the whole point is not to re-create an imagined past, a past that elides a lot of the labor and hard work that

goes into a lot of this food, but to recognize the social value that these dishes carry. For someone like me, I’ve used this food to better understand who I am and where I came from.

**AU: One of the arguments you make in the book is that food can be a tool of ethno-nationalist projects. How so?**

**AG:** The Levant was part of the Ottoman Empire before nation-states were established, and as part of the empire, it was a very pluralistic and diverse place. Once national projects emerged, whether it was Turkey or Israel or others, their founders often were trying to establish territories that were defined by ethnic unity.

Sometimes those aims were achieved by very violent ends, like the Armenian genocide, the expulsion of Palestinians in 1947 and ’48 and after—it’s ongoing—and population transfers between Greece and Turkey after World War I. But I think that project is also carried out and continued in other ways, and food is one example.

On Israel-Palestine, the chapter by Dafna Hirsch is interesting, because it presents us with some of the history of cultural appropriation, so there is this embrace of something like falafel not as Palestinian but as Israeli. It’s a renaming that coincides with a dramatic shift in who controls territory on the ground, and who is displaced, and who is settling the territory.

**AU: In the introduction to the book, you mention an essay that bell hooks wrote, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance.” How has hooks’s thinking influenced the book?**

**AG:** She writes that as difference becomes commodified—particularly in white, mainstream US culture—consuming or enjoying the culture of the “other” can very easily become this self-congratulatory, reductive form of cultural exchange. When it’s understood as a substitute for challenging the status quo or when it erases social or historical contexts, it can even be harmful. That principle—the idea that encounters with difference and consumption across cultures are not always inherently positive—is a foundational principle of the book. **N**

**“Food is not restricted by any sort of arbitrarily constructed national border.”**



# The SCORE

## Dangerous Driving

BRYCE COVERT +  
MIKE KONCZAL

**A**fter the shootings of a baby, a teenager, and two police officers in New York City, Mayor Eric Adams was quick to respond to the problem of gun violence. He gave a speech on the subject in January and laid out a comprehensive plan for combating violent crime.

But other deaths commanded few major headlines. In December, a truck hit Arcellie Muschamp while she was on duty as a nanny pushing a 1-year-old boy in a stroller across an intersection. She saved the boy's life by pushing him out of the way, but she died from her injuries. No charges were immediately filed against the driver. Then in January, a bus driver hit and killed Antonina Zatulovska, a 15-year-old who was in the crosswalk. The driver was arrested and issued a desk appearance ticket. And in February, a man with six citations for speeding in school zones in 2021 fatally struck Jack Mikulincer, a 99-year-old Holocaust survivor on his way to synagogue.

Gun deaths are tragic, but so are motor vehicle deaths, and they are on an even steeper increase. Yet far more attention has been paid to violent crime than to people dying on the roads.

Despite the fact that there were fewer people driving during the first year of the pandemic, the number of motor vehicle deaths rose 24 percent in 2020, the biggest increase in 96 years, according to the nonprofit National Safety Council. The relatively empty roads prompted people to drive at higher speeds, forgo seat belts, and take the wheel drunk. Overall, an estimated 42,060 people died in traffic collisions that year. The trend appears to have continued in 2021, with an estimated 21,450 deaths in the first six months, up 16 percent from the year before.

But roadway deaths were on the rise even before the pandemic. The number of deaths increased about 10 percent between 2010 and 2019, and the number of pedestrians killed in collisions grew 45 percent. It doesn't have to be this way: Most other developed countries have reduced traffic fatalities over the past decade.

As with many things, these tragedies are unevenly distributed. Despite being less likely to own an automobile, low-income people are more likely to be hit by one. Black, Hispanic, Native, and elderly people, as well as wheelchair users, are also at disproportionate risk of dying.

There has been a lot more attention paid to rising crime, but the numbers are nowhere near those of road deaths. According to the Gun Violence Archive, 19,491 people died from gun violence (excluding suicides) in 2020, up from 15,475 in 2019. Last year was similar, with 20,811 people killed by gunfire. While violent crime increased during the pandemic, the overall trend has been a steep decline since the late 1980s and early '90s.

To his credit, Mayor Adams delivered an address in the wake of Muschamp's death, although it garnered far less press attention, in which he announced a plan to make intersections safer through raised crosswalks, bike corrals, and other traffic-calming measures, plus more traffic enforcement and a public awareness campaign. The federal government also put forward a national strategy in January that encourages state and local governments to design safer roads, lower speed limits, and reduce drunk driving. But we must go much, much further if we're serious about preventing car deaths.

One solution is to install speed cameras, which have

decreased fatal and serious crashes by up to 58 percent in Europe, where they are ubiquitous. They also have the benefit of reducing interactions between law enforcement and drivers that allow police to target people of color, saddling them with fines or, far too often, leaving them dead.

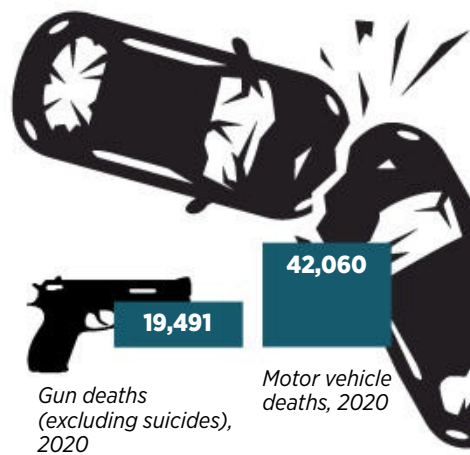
We also need to change our roads, which often plow through Black and low-income communities with the goal of making it easier to drive farther and faster. Replacing intersections with roundabouts could reduce crashes by more than 50 percent. We can hem in streets with curbs. Removing lanes, adding shoulders, bike paths, and speed bumps, and creating turn lanes would all decrease speeding and crashes.

Also, we need to rethink the way we design cars. Since 2000, the hood height of passenger trucks has increased by 11 percent and their weight by 24 percent. *Consumer Reports* found many trucks and SUVs have blind spots in front that are 11 feet longer than those of sedans. Many vehicles make it difficult for drivers to see pedestrians and increase the chance of fatality when they crash into someone. Americans are famous for our car culture, but it comes at a cost. A gun is a deadly weapon, but a car can be, too. It's a national tragedy that deserves a national outcry.

Bryce Covert

### Deadlier Than Guns

Car crashes kill people more than twice as often as gun violence.



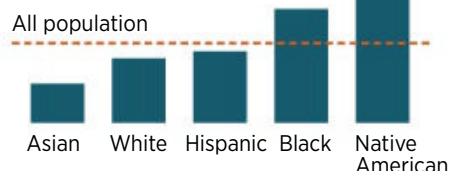
Roads have become more dangerous for pedestrians...

Pedestrians killed by cars, 2010-2019

45%

...and kill people of color disproportionately.

Relative pedestrian danger by ethnicity, 2010-2019



Sources: National Safety Council; Smart Growth America, "Dangerous by Design 2021"



SNAPSHOT/Vadim Girda

# War in Ukraine?

A Ukrainian serviceman, seen through a camouflage mesh, stands at a frontline position in the Luhansk region in eastern Ukraine on January 29. An estimated 100,000 Russian troops are massed near Ukraine's border, and the Biden administration says it worries that Russian President Vladimir Putin will mount some sort of invasion in the near future.

## By the Numbers



**\$15.5k**

Amount that Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) has been fined so far for refusing to wear a mask on the floor of the House of Representatives

**0**

Number of people who have died because of the House mask mandate, which Greene compared to the Holocaust

**5**

Number of "strikes" Twitter gave Greene before permanently suspending her account for spreading Covid-19 misinformation

**59**

Number of articles Greene wrote for the conspiracy

theory website *American Truth Seekers*, including one linking the Democratic Party to child sex, satanism, and the occult

**1**

Number of times Greene accused House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of unleashing the "gaspacho police"

**11**

Number of Republicans who joined all Democrats in voting to remove Greene from her committee assignments



CALVIN TRILLIN  
**DeadlinePoet**

## Trump Took 15 Boxes of Official Documents When He Left Office

So why'd he take those boxes home?

Well, here's a strong suspicion:

He meant to put stuff on display

And charge a steep admission.

by Jennifer Berkshire

# Why Teachers

# Are Dropping Out

Covid and the culture wars have turned  
an exodus of teachers into an emergency.

**N**EAL PATEL SURVIVED TEACHING IN THE PANDEMIC. IT WAS THE CULTURE wars that did him in.

In the fall of 2020, Patel added two flags to the wall of his science classroom in Johnston, Iowa. Now, alongside images of energy waves and the electromagnetic spectrum were the Gay Pride rainbow flag and a proclamation that Black Lives Matter. The flags, says Patel, represented the kind of inclusive space he was committed to creating, sending a signal to all students that even in this conservative suburb of Des Moines, there was a place for them.

School administrators supported him—on one condition. “They’re just there as decoration,” Patel says. “The only time I discuss the flags is when a student asks me about them.”

Patel assumes it was a student who snapped a picture of the display. Somehow it ended up on the Facebook page of a conservative state legislator. Representative Steve Holt, who lives 100 miles from Johnston, pointed to the flags as evidence of creeping left-wing indoctrination in Iowa’s schools and encouraged his constituents to take a stand. Patel says he was shocked by the attention, then upset: “Holt thinks it’s a political issue to try to create an inclusive environment, and he’s using that to try to further divide our community.”

Johnston has grown only more divided since Patel became Facebook fodder. At a school board meeting last fall, members debated whether to ban two books on race, including one by the Native American writer Sherman Alexie, after parents complained. The president of the Iowa State Senate, who represents a neighboring county, took the mic during the public comment period, calling for teachers who assigned “obscene” material to be prosecuted. Patel was in the crowd that night, to lend support to minority and LGBTQ students who’d come to speak out against banning the books. And he had an announcement of his own to make: This year would be his last as a teacher in Johnston.

**“I was tired of being undervalued and overworked. I was tired of being anxious and unhappy and not sleeping.”**

—Cristina Jung

Iowa’s increasingly toxic political climate was to blame, Patel says, but it wasn’t the only reason he was walking away from a profession he’d hoped to make his career. Students’ trauma, the intense pressure to make up for what they’d lost during the months of remote learning, the demands of parents—Patel felt that he could do little more than try to stay afloat. Teaching had not just become harder; it was a worse job than when he’d started six years ago. In 2017, Republicans took control of the state and immediately moved to strip public employees, including teachers, of most of their collective bargaining rights.

“Teaching is a job that takes from you, takes from you, and takes from you,” Patel says. “Post-pandemic, it’s been a lot of take.”

### A Profession in Crisis

**E**VEN BEFORE OMICRON SWAMPED SCHOOLS THIS WINTER, the nation’s teachers were in crisis. TikTok and other social media sites were deluged with videos by teachers who’d broken up with teaching, declaring that a job that was tough in the best of times had become untenable. “To put it simply, I was exhausted,” wrote Cristina Jung in her public sign-off from eight years

of teaching English in Irvine, Calif. She attributed her decision to a now-familiar litany: work responsibilities that seemed unending, the ongoing trauma of the pandemic, and student needs that no structure was in place to meet. “I was tired of being undervalued and overworked,” she says. “I was tired of being anxious and unhappy and not sleeping.”

A steady stream of polls warns that an alarming number of teachers share this view, with a quarter to half of educators reporting that they’re considering changing careers. One recent survey by the National Education Association, the country’s largest teachers’ union, found that the number of teachers contemplating quitting has



**Those who can:** A demonstration to protest low teacher pay and inadequate school funding at the Arizona State Capitol in March 2018.

spiked since the start of the school year. Nine out of 10 reported that burnout is a serious problem, as teachers stretch to accommodate vacancies or Covid-related absences. Black teachers were the most likely to say that they’re considering leaving.

“Teachers are feeling collectively overwhelmed and helpless,” says Elizabeth Thiel, president of the Portland Association of Teachers in Oregon.

After two teachers resigned from Portland schools in a single week last fall, the union decided to survey its 4,000 members. The results were staggering, Thiel says. Of the 2,800 members who responded, a quarter said their physical and mental health was adversely affected by the stress of teaching in a pandemic. Fully half indicated they were considering leaving earlier than planned. “They’re trying to decide whether they can continue teaching,” Thiel says.

Such statistics paint a dire picture.

**“It’s been stunning to watch how the pendulum swung first towards teachers, then in the complete opposite direction.”**

—Ryan Heisinger



**Of *Maus* and men:** In January, the school board in McMinn County, Tenn., disregarded the objections of teachers and voted to remove Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel from the curriculum.

But so far, teachers have yet to join the “great resignation.” The surveys may show teachers are thinking about leaving, but that does not mean they’ve actually left. Staff shortages in some states and in specialty areas don’t necessarily indicate a national shortage. And the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ data has fluctuated, showing, at one point, that teacher turnover actually *dipped* during the pandemic.

Indeed, the far more urgent shortfall is in school support staff: substitute teachers, school bus drivers, and paraprofessionals.

Still, there are lots of reasons to fear that the worst may be yet to come. Alyssa Hadley Dunn, an associate professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, argues that the data fails to capture the depths of a crisis in motion: The teacher who just announced his departure on TikTok or who decided to quit over winter break won’t show up in large-scale data sets until next year.

“We will see more teachers leaving because they’re being pushed over the edge by the pandemic,” says Dunn, whose new book *Teaching on Days After* chronicles the experiences of teachers in the wake of tragedies and traumas. Just as the recent dramatic departure of low-wage workers reflects the decades-long degradation of those jobs, teachers are responding to policies and systems that predate Covid’s onslaught, Dunn says. In her conversations with teachers who have left or are contemplating quitting, one theme emerges again and again: It isn’t just the pandemic that’s driving them to leave.

“The pandemic is exacerbating teachers’ feelings of being silenced,” Dunn says. “They feel like they have no voice in what happens in their classrooms and no say over policy implementation, even in a public health crisis.”

## Pendulum Swings

IT’S HARD TO RECALL NOW, BUT IN THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE PANDEMIC, WHEN schools shut down virtually overnight, fusing classrooms and living rooms, there was a brief moment when public regard for teachers soared. A tweet from the television producer Shonda Rhimes, retweeted more than 90,000 times, summed up the exuberant embrace. “Been homeschooling a 6-year-old and 8-year-old for one hour and 11 minutes. Teachers deserve to make a billion dollars a year. Or a week.”

Ryan Heisinger entered teaching as a Teach for America corps member eight years ago, at a time when public school teachers and their unions had emerged as a go-to bipartisan political punching bag. Now teachers were heroes. But it didn’t last.

“It’s been stunning to watch how quickly the pendulum swung first towards teachers, then in the complete opposite direction,” says Heisinger, who left his job at a charter school in Newark, N.J., in the spring of 2021 and is now attending graduate school to become a social worker. “It illustrates the exploitative mindset we have around teachers.”

Viewed through the blur of pandemic time, the sharp vicissitudes of public opinion about teachers can appear as spiky as a Covid case chart. But long before commentators were calling on President Biden to fire teachers en masse if they refused to show up to work, the “bad teacher” had emerged as one of the Obama

administration’s key targets. Getting rid of her was seen not just as good education policy but as good economic policy.

The thinking went something like this: Make teacher evaluations tougher, and teaching would get better, which would mean higher student achievement, more students graduating from college, and ultimately a country better able to outsmart China et al. “Tougher” meant holding teachers accountable for how their students fared on standardized tests.

In 2010, Colorado became one of the first states to enact a high-stakes teacher evaluation law; by 2017, nearly every state had one on the books. While the pandemic may have disrupted everything about schooling, policies like Colorado’s Senate Bill 10, with its 18-page evaluation rubric and 345-page user guide aimed at weeding out bad teachers, remain in place.

For Shannon Peterson, an English language acquisition teacher in Aurora, that meant leading her students through a writing exercise last fall as her principal observed. Peterson’s students, many of them immigrants who live in poverty, bore the pandemic heavily, she says: “The kids are stressed, all of their writing is about anxiety, and attendance is way down.”

To her delight, the students responded enthusiastically to the writing prompt she’d come up with: comparing and contrasting the Harlem Renaissance and Black Lives Matter, and how the entertainment industries in their respective eras related to both. In a year of stress and struggle for teachers and students alike, here was something to celebrate. “Excellent writing came out of this,” Peterson says.

Her principal wasn’t convinced. Peterson, he felt, hadn’t done enough actual teaching during the observation. “I just don’t feel comfortable checking off these boxes,” he told her.

The previous year, when the cash-strapped school district had offered teachers buyouts to leave, Peterson turned it down: “I felt an enormous obligation to go back for the kids and my colleagues.” After her evaluation, though, Peterson had reached a breaking point. She quit a week later, walking away from a career that spanned 23 years, 18½ of

them in Aurora. “I’m not a box,” Peterson says.

Two weeks after Peterson resigned, a major study came out: The decade-long push to weed out bad teachers had come to naught. The billions of dollars spent, the wars with teachers’ unions, and the collapse in teacher morale had produced “null effects” on student test scores and educational attainment.







## A Collective Howl

**I**N 2018, HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF teachers throughout the country took part in strikes and walkouts that shut down schools across entire states. The #RedforEd protests, which began in West Virginia and spread to Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona, were a collective howl by teachers against bread-and-butter indignities—low pay and the erosion of working conditions—but they also reflected frustration with the hostility to public education and teachers that was emanating from both parties.

Gilbert, Ariz., teacher Elise Villescaz marched with her colleagues to the state capitol, demanding that the legislature direct more resources to public school students and their teachers. She comes from a family of teachers—her mother still teaches in the district where Villescaz attended school. Teaching middle and high school English at schools in the Salt River Valley, Villescaz saw firsthand the consequences of the state’s disinvestment in public education. #RedforEd represented an opportunity to finally do something about it.

“Arizona doesn’t value public education,” Villescaz says. “It takes very little research to find out that we’re at the very bottom in student funding, teacher pay, student-to-counselor ratios—you name it.”

The protest movement garnered deep public support. Two years later, Arizonans would vote to hike taxes on the state’s wealthiest residents and direct the proceeds to public education. Then came the pandemic. When the schools in many districts reopened for in-person learning even as Covid raged in the state, Villescaz saw it as yet another sign that the state’s political leaders didn’t value its schools or the people who work in them. “The pan-

demie really made it obvious to me just how devalued we all are,” Villescaz says.

The 2021 Arizona legislative session, with its hyper-partisan focus on schools, only confirmed that view. Lawmakers passed a teacher gag law, curtailing the discussion of race, ethnicity, and sex in classrooms and threatening schools that violate it with fines. And they enacted a flat tax plan that essentially undermined the tax hike voters had just approved.

When it was time to renew her contract last May, her ninth year of teaching, Villescaz opted to walk away. “It was heartbreaking, but I had no choice,” she says. “We’ve been dehumanized.”

## Psychic Pay Cut

**F**OR MANY TEACHERS, THE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING THROUGH A POLITICIZED pandemic has been equivalent to a pay cut. That’s because, as researchers have found, some teacher compensation comes in the form of what scholars refer to as “psychic rewards”—the feeling that they’re making a difference in the lives of kids and doing work that’s important to society. When teachers are painted as enemies of the public good—as leftist indoctrinators or tax-funded loafers—it undermines those psychic rewards, according to Jack Schneider, an education historian at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. “Their checks may look the same every month, but their total compensation has been affected,” Schneider says.

For special education teacher Reyna Guerra-Vega, it was her actual paycheck that proved to be the last straw. Guerra-Vega, who describes her calling as figuring out how to keep young Black and brown special education students out of jail, moved from Oakland, Calif., to Arizona in 2020 to care for her mother. Seven days into her new teaching job in Mesa, her mother died.

Guerra-Vega says that while she was aware that moving from a state where teachers’ unions are powerful to one where they’re comparatively weak would cost her, the reality of working in a state that ranks 50th in teacher pay was chastening.

**Gag rule:** Neal Patel, a science teacher in Johnston, Iowa, in his classroom.

**The Gay Pride and Black Lives Matter banners are “just there as decoration. The only time I discuss the flags is when a student asks me about them.”**

—Neal Patel



She was taking home just over \$1,000 every two weeks and paying \$400 a month for health insurance. When she did the math, Guerra-Vega realized that her teacher's salary was not much more than what she had earned at her second job, washing dishes at an Italian restaurant. "This is what it's like to teach in a state that hates teachers," she says.

As Guerra-Vega took stock of her long hours and ever-expanding workload—one that included monitoring the progress of 107 students with an array of special needs—she settled on a word for what she was experiencing: exploitation. "This is why you're losing teachers, because you won't pay them and the work is unsustainable," says Guerra-Vega, who resigned right before Thanksgiving. A state in which teacher shortages have been a problem for years—district and charter schools report more than 6,500 vacancies—had just lost one more. "This system is going to crash," she adds, "because more teachers are going to leave."

## Cascading Crisis

**T**HE DEPARTURE OF TEACHERS HAS A CASCADING EFFECT, RIPPLING THROUGH schools. As Omicron surged, schools that were already short on staff were the first to close. And in a year when students require more support than ever, the absence of teachers and other school personnel is compounding what's widely regarded as a student mental health crisis.

Villescaz has spent the past year subbing in schools around Phoenix, including in classrooms where students have suddenly lost their teacher or a full-time replacement has yet to be found. "Some of these students have known nothing but subs," she says.

**School's out:** Kentucky public school teachers rally for a "day of action" at the state capitol in Lexington in April 2018.

In schools where there are no substitute teachers to be found, the remaining staff must make up for their missing colleagues. Alexandra Lopez Reitzes teaches art to middle schoolers at East Harlem Scholars Middle School, part of a small charter school network in New York City. Last year a spate of departures meant that teachers had to cover additional classes during what would have been prep time. While the school has taken steps to remedy the problem, Lopez Reitzes says that she saw firsthand the toll that staff vacancies can have on a school and its culture. Lopez Reitzes stresses that the problems at her school have largely

**"We're doing the work of being the teacher, the therapist, and the mom. That's why a lot of people are leaving."**

—Alexandra Lopez Reitzes

abated. But the cycle she describes, in which deteriorating working conditions caused by teachers fleeing induces more teachers to flee, is an all too familiar one. "Not only are we doing twice the work in half of the time," she says, "but we're doing the work of being the teacher, the therapist, and the mom because the children are struggling more. That's why a lot of people are leaving or thinking about it. We're holding all of it."

Like many other teachers I in-

terviewed for this story, Lopez Reitzes acknowledged that, for her, leaving isn't an option. At 44, she describes herself as being essentially trapped by her salary. Instead, she and her colleagues are attempting to address their deteriorating working conditions by organizing a union. "We're not the only charter in New York City that is considering it," she says. "I think at this point we're all feeling like, 'This is not OK. You can't treat people this way.'"

There is no easy fix to staunch the exodus of teachers. School districts, unlike, say, Starbucks, can't simply boost wages to attract new employees. Nor is there an army of wannabe teachers waiting in the wings. Teacher training programs have seen enrollment decline by more than a third since 2010—a trend that has only accelerated since the start of the pandemic. A survey by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education found that nearly 20 percent of undergraduate-level teacher preparation programs saw enrollment drop significantly this year. In Oklahoma, a state grappling with a deepening shortage of teachers, training programs are shutting down because of the lack of interest.

The response by lawmakers has been to loosen the rules governing who can work in classrooms. Oregon, Missouri, and Arizona now allow anyone with a high school diploma and a background check to take over classrooms as a substitute teacher. While the measures are mostly supposed to be temporary, the staffing shortages used to justify them are not.

It's not hard to see the slippery slope here—or why loosening licensing requirements has been a perennial policy goal on the right. These fill-in teachers, nonunion by design, will be vastly cheaper than their certified equivalents. And while the 18-year-old overseeing a classroom, as Kansas just allowed, won't actually be teaching, that too may be the point. Dramatically driving down the cost of schooling will entail redefining teaching as something more akin to proctoring, where some adult—indeed, any adult—supervises while students receive instruction online.

## Broken Promise

**"T**HE BEAUTY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION is that it takes every student. But that's also its greatest challenge. The trauma, the brokenness—our schools take them, too," says

Will Wong. A former high school math teacher, Wong worked for 14 years for the San Gabriel Unified School District in the middle of Los Angeles County, serving as a union president, principal, and ultimately as the fiscal director of the district. "I've seen it all," he says.

Wong fears that the pandemic has only exacerbated the gap between what our schools can

do and what they are tasked with doing. “Teaching, feeding kids, violence prevention, mental health needs—this is what our schools are faced with right now, but personnel, capacity, and funding don’t match what we’re requiring schools to do,” Wong says. The result is an increasingly destructive cycle that drives teachers to flee in frustration, leaving schools even less prepared to confront escalating challenges. As public trust further erodes, the calls to privatize schools grow steadily louder.

That cycle is precisely why Nic Jones is considering ending his career as a high school English teacher in Boston just as he was getting started. Jones began teaching at Jeremiah E. Burke High School last April, committed to working with some of the city’s highest-needs students. Today he is struggling to remain afloat. “It’s not a sustainable job when you don’t have any support,” Jones says.

Burke High School, or “the Burke” in local parlance, has long swung between failure and redemption, demonstrating the extraordinary faith that, given the right tools, schools can ameliorate the effects of entrenched poverty and racial segregation. In 2002, the school was held up by first lady Laura Bush as an early success story from her husband’s No Child Left Behind program. But the gains in test scores proved temporary, and the Burke was once more declared failing. By 2015, the Burke was ascendant again, now as an exemplar of the Obama-era reform recipe: more authority for school leaders, weaker unions, lots of energetic young teachers, and a relentless focus on performance data.

While the focus on metrics lives on, the numbers Jones cites are mostly data points of despair. The school has a single counselor for more than 300 students, roughly three-quarters of whom Jones believes need counseling. This year, Jones’s final class of the day had nine students, all learning English, all at different levels, five of them on special education learning plans. “I probably spend 90 percent of my time just trying to help these kids advocate for themselves so they can say what they need.”

There is another figure Jones returns to again and again: \$8. That was the median net worth of African American households in greater Boston in 2015—a statistic that successive waves of education reform have done nothing to budge.

Jones, who is of Cape Verdean descent, grew up in Boston, bouncing from school to school. “I got expelled from a lot of them,” he recalls. Getting more teachers like him into the schools

is key to reaching students like those at the Burke. “The only way they’re going to get a real education is if they have teachers who can provide strong, uplifting, culturally relevant lessons that they care about,” Jones says. Yet he’s now contemplating an exit himself, no longer convinced that schools like his can counter Boston’s legacy of racism and the inequities the pandemic has only deepened. Instead, he’s eyeing elected office and a possible future run for the city council.

“I don’t want to stop teaching, but we desperately need an education perspective in City Hall,” Jones says. “Our elected officials have no idea what’s happening in our school buildings.”

### Opportunity Lost

**T**HE STORY OF EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC HAS quickly hardened into one of abject failure, particularly for poor and minority students. In its early days, though, the dramatic suspension of “normal” school was seen as an opportunity to transform education.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo used one of his Covid news conferences to announce the creation of a Reimagine Education commission, a partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aimed at harnessing new technologies to reform schooling in the “new normal.” President Trump’s education secretary, Betsy DeVos, celebrated too: Here was her lifelong crusade—moving kids out of “government” schools—delivered in a flash. But it wasn’t just “disruptors” and hucksters who saw possibility in the moment. Teachers did as well.

Selena Carrion, a fourth-grade English teacher in the Bronx, was one of them. She’d spent much of her 10 years in the classroom fighting for curricula that better reflected the lives of her students, and for breathing room within the culture of standardized testing that dominated the schools where she taught. “I’d tried so many avenues to really push change and progress, but it never went far enough,” she says.

The pandemic arrived at a time when Carrion could already sense the fixation on testing beginning to wane. Suddenly the old rules no longer applied. With a grant from the city, she planned an ambitious project to redesign her school’s library as a multimedia space dedicated to helping students become digitally literate citizens. Carrion envisioned a place where teachers could use lessons gleaned from the pandemic to better reach students at a time when they were desperate for connection.

But the window of possibility that so invigorated her quickly slammed shut. Despite being awash in pandemic relief funding, school administrators nixed the library project along with art classes and other “extras” to focus on testing and remediation. Carrion handed in her resignation in August.

These days, she’s designing curricula for teachers who are still in the classroom. While she loves her new role, walking away from teaching has also meant giving up a key part of her identity. Not only is she no longer a classroom teacher, but she’s no longer pushing for change from within the system. Carrion says she’s come to doubt that the kind of change she hoped for will ever happen. “Not only are we not going to try to transform education and really learn from the pandemic,” she says, “but things are going to get worse. We’re almost going to go backwards.”

**“We desperately need an education perspective in City Hall. Our elected officials have no idea what’s happening in our school buildings.”**

—Nic Jones

**Race to the bottom:** Russell Vought, a former director of the Office of Management and Budget, speaking at a rally to ban critical race theory.



# THE TAKING OF BLACK

# LAND

ELIE  
MYSTAL



## *The use and abuse of em*

**Lost neighbors:**  
Residents of Seneca Village, a thriving Black community that was razed to the ground to make way for Central Park.

**I**N 1825, JOHN AND ELIZABETH WHITEHEAD DIVIDED THEIR Manhattan farmland into 200 lots and began selling it off. I know it's hard to imagine Manhattan as ever having farmland, but "the city" remained densely clustered on the southern tip of the island well into the 19th century.

The first three lots of the Whiteheads' land were bought for \$125 by a shoe shiner named Andrew Williams. Williams was a Black man, and the Whiteheads were among the very few white landowners who would sell to Black people back then.

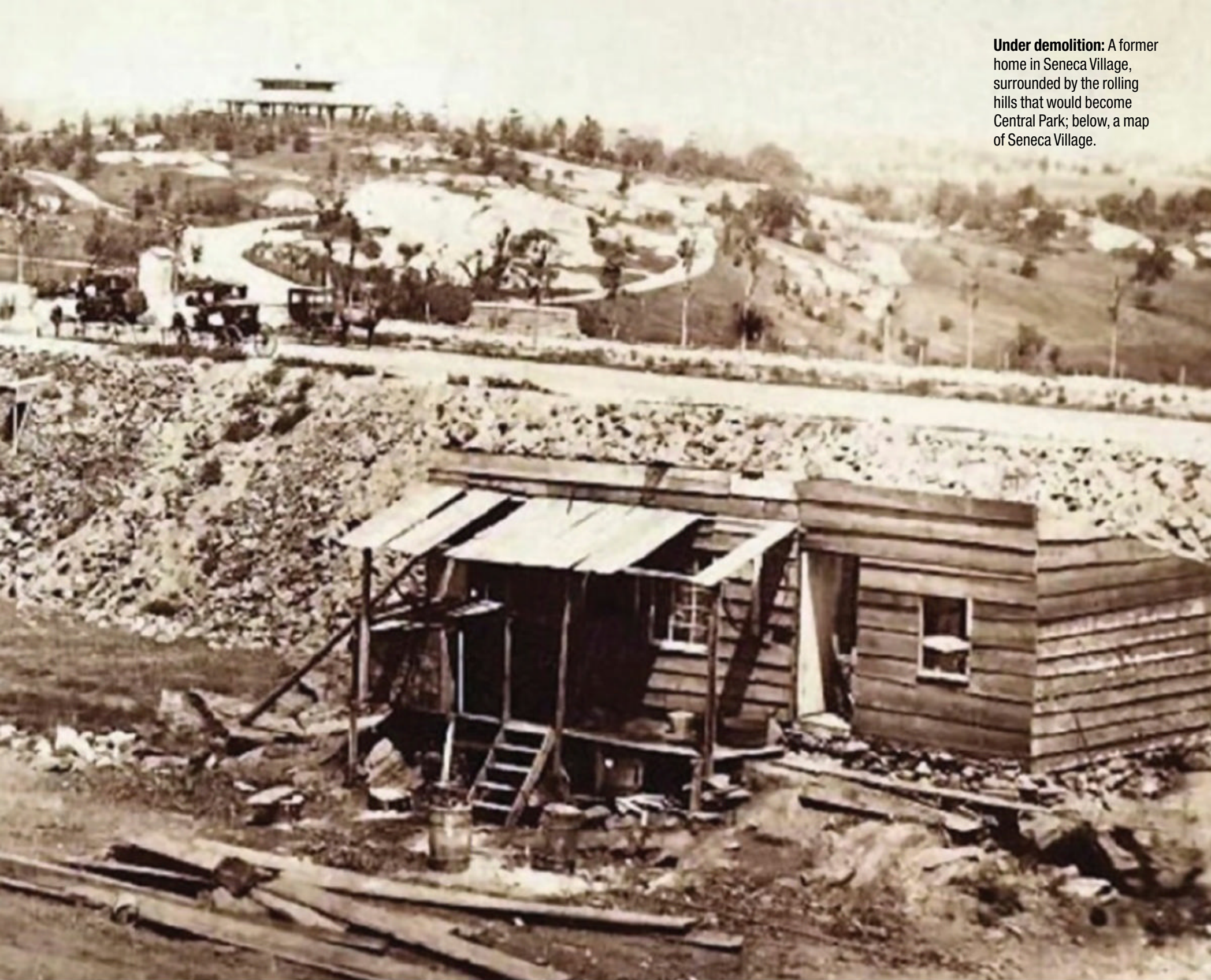
Williams was a member of the New York African Society for Mutual Relief. The group sought to help Black people buy real estate and was moderately successful at helping the Black middle class gain a foothold in New York. Other Black families began buying land from the Whiteheads in the area around Williams's new plot. A Black store clerk named Epiphany Davis bought 12

lots for \$578. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church bought six lots, and the village became even more desirable to Black middle-class families. Irish immigrants, another group of "undesirables" the Whiteheads were willing to sell to, bought many of the other lots. The Whiteheads ended up selling half of their lots to Black people. The little enclave they made was known as Seneca Village. According to census data, in 1855 Seneca Village had 264 residents, three churches, three cemeteries, and two schools.

Seneca Village was a home of political power for Black people as well. Remember, in 1855 there were no 14th or 15th Amendments. There was no guaranteed right to vote for African Americans, even free ones living in the North. To be eligible to vote in New York State in the 1850s, a Black man needed to be a male landowner in possession of \$250 worth of property

LEFT: COURTESY OF BANISHED, RIGHT: COURTESY OF NYC MUNICIPAL ARCHIVES

**Under demolition:** A former home in Seneca Village, surrounded by the rolling hills that would become Central Park; below, a map of Seneca Village.



***inent domain, from Seneca Village to “urban renewal.”***





and have state residency for three years. Neither the property nor the residency requirements applied to white men. Seneca Village was a way for some Black men to meet that property requirement. Of the 100 Black people eligible to vote in New York State in 1845, 10 lived in Seneca Village. Five years later, in 1850, of the 71 Black property owners in New York City, 20 percent lived in Seneca Village.

By 1857, however, the entire area had been razed to the ground. The homes and churches were demolished, and the people were scattered. Seneca Village did not fall to some natural disaster, or even the ubiquitous mob of angry whites that shows up, again and again, throughout American history to lynch Black people who seem to be getting ahead. No, Seneca Village was destroyed because in 1853 New York passed a law allowing for the construction of Central Park.

**S**ENECA VILLAGE WAS LOCATED IN WHAT IS NOW THOUGHT OF AS THE WEST side of Central Park. Its boundaries extended from about 82nd Street to 89th Street, between what is now Central Park West and where Seventh Avenue would be if it extended straight through the park. Seneca Village was a small and arguably unnecessary part of the 775 acres of land set aside by the legislature to create the park.

The government had the authority to buy or “take” the land for Central Park under the doctrine of eminent domain, which is enshrined in the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution. Eminent domain is the theory that all land, even private property, can be acquired by the government if it is in the public interest. The relevant part of the Fifth Amendment reads:

No person shall be...deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

Eminent domain is such a core concept of sovereignty that the US Supreme Court has said that it doesn’t even require a constitutional provision. But compensation for exercising that inherent sovereign authority does require some constitutional language.

To understand eminent domain, you have to appreciate that, if you start from first principles, all land is “public.” All land is just there, claimed only by whoever or whatever happens to be standing on it, and can physically defend it, at a particular time. It’s all God’s land, if you’re into that sort of thing. Or the king’s land, if you lived in pretty much any pre-Enlightenment society.

“Private” property has surely al-

ways existed in some form—I’m certain that some of the ancient art we’ve uncovered and put in our museums was actually early modern “Beware of Bear” signs fashioned by cavemen who were sick of being solicited at their homes. But as a standing inalienable legal concept, fully private property that rulers are not allowed to violate at will is new (in geologic time) and kind of weird. Entire philosophical tracts on government (including the only one most people have ever heard of: John Locke’s second treatise on government) have been written to explain, more or less, why private property should exist at all. Private property is not the natural or inevitable result of settled society.

Different legal systems treat the concept of private ownership differently. Take, for instance, the initial “purchase” of Manhattan Island by the Dutch. In 1626 Peter Minuit, director of New Netherland, reported that he bought Manhattan for 60 guilders (about \$24, according to 19th-century historians). It would be too glib and easy to say that the Indigenous people who sold him the land didn’t understand private property. As Arizona State law professor Robert Miller makes clear, they likely did have a fully functional concept of property “exclusivity.” But we would probably call the land deal a “lease,” not a “purchase.” In his book *Law in American History*, University of Virginia law professor G. Edward White makes the case that the Native Lenape were “not relinquishing the island, but simply welcoming the Dutch as additional occupants.” It was the colonizers who didn’t understand or respect the deal.

Unlike private property, eminent domain does flow naturally and inevitably from the concept that ownership exists only insofar as the state is able to secure and defend the territory. If the state needs your land for some public purpose, and you can’t raise an army to oppose the state, your land is forfeited. Living in a state that is willing to pay for the private land it needs to take is just a modern invention for property owners

**Marking the spot:**  
A protest on Juneteenth in 2020 ended with a gathering at the site where Seneca Village once stood.

**Seneca Village did not fall to some natural disaster or even the ubiquitous mob of angry whites that shows up throughout history.**

who would otherwise get screwed if they happen to live on land the state needs. Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, whose *On the Law of War and Peace* from 1625 is one of the first real texts of international law, wrote: “The property of subjects is under the eminent domain of the state.... But when this is done the state is bound to make good the loss to those who lose their property.” That’s the nice way of saying: “There wouldn’t be a West India Company without these fortifications, but here, take some money and go.” The Dutch didn’t really “own” Manhattan in 1626, because they couldn’t defend Manhattan in 1626. Indeed, Wall Street is so named because there used to be a defensive freaking wall there. The wall was built by slaves the Dutch also “bought” and brought with them to defend the settlement of New Amsterdam from attacks by the Indigenous Americans, the British, or pirates.

Now, I would love to tell you what James Madison, author of the Fifth Amendment, meant by “just compensation.” But I can’t. I can’t even tell you why eminent domain is tacked onto this amendment and not some other. I can tell you that Madison’s initial proposed language was: “No person shall be...obliged to relinquish his property, where it may be necessary for public use, without just compensation.” Congress changed it to its final version, but I can’t tell you why. No record of whatever debate may have occurred exists. No *Federalist Paper* focuses on this particular topic.

What I can tell you is that when white people want your shit, they will take it, and Black people will rarely be justly compensated for the destruction of their wealth.

**F**IGHTING AGAINST eminent domain has become a bit of a cause célèbre for libertarian forces on the right. They’ve even given it one of their cool, right-wing names, so that their entire objection can fit on the bumper

sticker on somebody’s truck. They call eminent domain actions “takings.” Get it? The government is “taking” your stuff; who could support that, right?

Much of the heat on the right is over what constitutes a taking at all. Eminent domain certainly refers to physical takings: You had some land and now you don’t. But arguably, eminent domain should also come into play when the government dictates how you are allowed to use your property. These instances are called “regulatory takings,” and they happen when, say, the government declares your private property a national historic site and thus prevents you from demolishing it and building a CVS. How much compensation is the government required to give out then?

Another large area of contention happens when the government takes only part of your property. Let’s say that the government wants to place a few wind turbines on part of your land. The private property owner can still live there, so is it a taking at all? What if the wind turbines are super noisy? What if they “cause cancer”? (Author’s note: They don’t.) What if they’re really quiet but super ugly? What is the just compensation for ruining your view?

If you know anything about Republicans, you understand why the right-wingers get up for this fight, and you can see why liberals are generally on the side of the government when it comes to eminent domain. We need things like wind turbines and historic sites much more than we need libertarians bitching and moaning about whether they received enough of a vig from the government for their troubles.

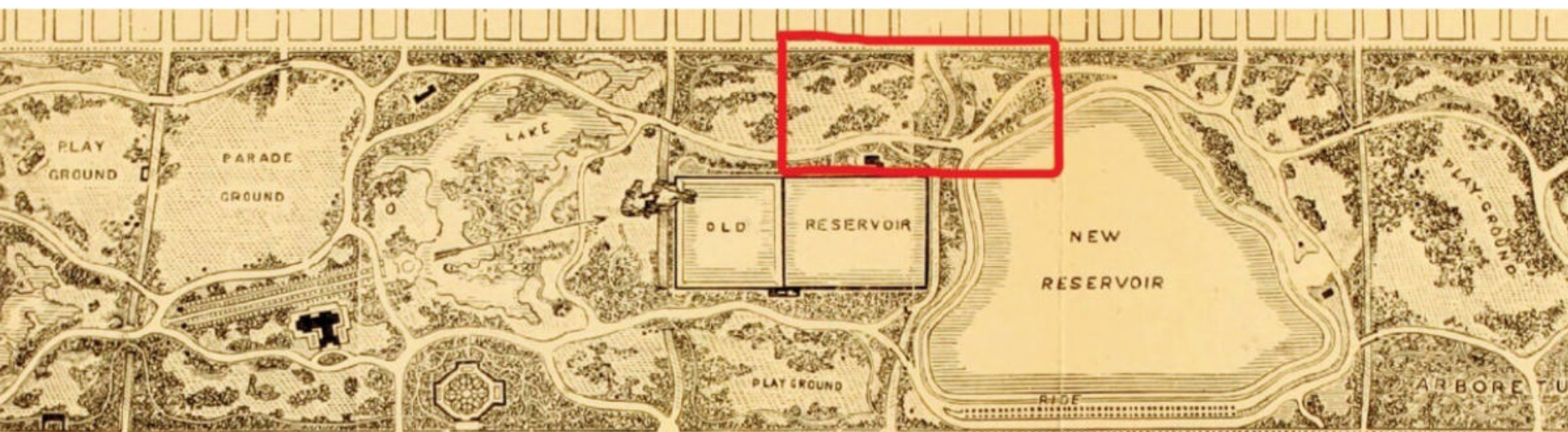
**What I can tell you is that when white people want your shit, they will take it, and Black people will rarely be justly compensated.**

**Pillars of the community:**

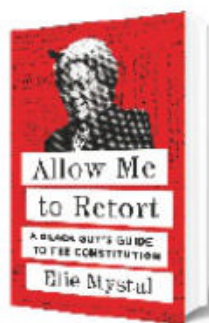
Albro Lyons and Mary Joseph Marshall, noted abolitionists, owned plots of land in Seneca Village. Below, the preliminary plan for Central Park, with the area of Seneca Village indicated in red.



If I were a Republican, I would spend the next 30 minutes of your life telling you about a 2005 case called *Kelo v. City of New London*. Conservatives complain about this case more than Pharaoh complained about Yahweh. The case is about a white lady, Susette Kelo, who didn’t want to sell her pink house. In a twist to the standard eminent domain case, New London, Conn., wanted to acquire her land to then sell it to a private developer, which created a Supreme Court battle. In a controversial 5-4 decision, the liberal wing of the court, joined by Anthony Kennedy,



## My issue with *Kelo* is that it ignores entire Black and brown communities that have been wiped off the damn map by eminent domain.



**Coming to a bookstore near you:** This article is adapted from Elie Mystal's forthcoming book, to be published by the New Press on March 1.

Reluctantly, I agree with the Republicans about this issue. Clarence Thomas, in dissent in *Kelo*, said that the majority was converting the “public use” allowed by the Fifth Amendment into any vague promise of a “public purpose.” And, God help me, I think Thomas was right about that. The government should not use its powers of eminent domain to essentially acquire land on the cheap for business interests, just because those businesses promise that there will be some public purpose behind their profit motive. For instance, I don’t think the government should be involved in acquiring land to build sports arenas that will be owned by wealthy team owners and used to pump the valuation of their sports franchises into the billions.

My problem with *Kelo* is that centering this issue on a white homeowner and the legal distinction between public “use” versus “purpose” ignores entire Black and brown communities that have been wiped off the damn map by the government’s use of eminent domain. Where’s the movie about Seneca Village? Where’s the movie about the Black and Latino renters who get crushed every time the local team wants a new stadium? Where’s the movie about all the people and communities who were destroyed by former New York City parks commissioner Robert Moses?

Yeah, if we’re going to talk about eminent domain, we’re going to talk about how many of our roads, highways, and beaches were figuratively built on top of the bones of Black and brown people who used to live there. I’m sorry, I just can’t get up for this lawyer fight between public use and public purpose, when the government’s definition of public use is so often merely “playthings for white people,” as if that’s an acceptable constitutional definition of the term.

**T**HE FIRST TIME I HEARD ABOUT EMINENT domain was in college, where I read Robert Caro’s seminal book *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. Moses is responsible for so much of the way modern cities look and feel, and not just in New York, because his methods were imported and copied throughout the country. Moses was a destroyer of Black and brown communities. And eminent domain is what allowed that asshole to be racist at an industrial scale.

If I may summarize one of the greatest modern biographies ever written in two sentences: Robert Moses was a deeply racist man who built highways, bridges, parks, beaches, and even housing projects by bulldozing the hopes, dreams, and often homes of people in his way. His main tactic for acquiring land for his projects was identifying vulnerable minority or immigrant communities, declaring their homes and land “blighted,” and then using the government’s power of eminent domain to evict people from their homes over their objections and for a fraction

ruled that taking private property and then selling it to private interests for economic redevelopment was indeed a constitutional use of the government’s eminent domain power.

Conservatives went nuts. They made a fucking movie about this lady and her stupid house. Parts of the house were moved and “rededicated” at a new site, and it’s now some kind of monument to the fight against big government overreach.

of what their communities were actually worth.

Declaring a community “blighted” or a home “condemned” is a favorite trick of the government when it wants to avoid paying just compensation for the land it takes. It’s what Moses did, repeatedly, throughout New York City in the 1930s, ’40s, ’50s, and into the ’60s. Moses would target a community, have state assessors declare it a “slum,” and acquire the land through eminent domain at cut-rate prices. And it’s a method many cities and states would copy under the guise of “urban renewal.”

Urban renewal laws authorize the state to seize land it has designated blighted and deteriorated in some way. The New York State urban renewal law is codified in Article 15 of New York Consolidated Laws, Section 500. Look at how the law describes the purpose of the policy in Section 501:

There exist in many municipalities within this state residential, non-residential, commercial, industrial or vacant areas, and combinations thereof, which are slum or blighted, or which are becoming slum or blighted areas because of substandard, insanitary, deteriorated or deteriorating conditions, factors, and characteristics, with or without tangible physical blight. The existence of such areas constitutes a serious and growing menace, is injurious to the public safety, health, morals and welfare, contributes increasingly to the spread of crime, juvenile delinquency and disease, necessitates excessive and disproportionate expenditures of public funds for all forms of public service and constitutes a negative influence on adjacent properties impairing their economic soundness and stability, thereby threatening the source of public revenues.

As Yoda might say, “Mud-hole? Slimy? My home, this is.” Clearing out “the slums” and replacing run-down and dilapidated-looking buildings with fresh, shiny, economically productive buildings and infrastructure sounds like a great

plan, unless you are the person being cleared out. Then, not only are you being displaced from your community, your “just compensation” becomes slum prices, leaving you only enough money to go and try to find a different slum to live in. The government usually doesn’t pay people in so-called blighted communities what their homes are worth, and never pays



**Little pink house:** Susette Kelo stands outside her home, which became a symbol in 2005 of the abuse of eminent domain.



them what the land will be worth after all the happy-clappy urban renewal takes place.

This is why eminent domain so often takes advantage of vulnerable people and communities. The government doesn't actually want to pay a fair price for the land and doesn't want to fight legal battles against well-connected and powerful communities who can protect their property and interests in court.

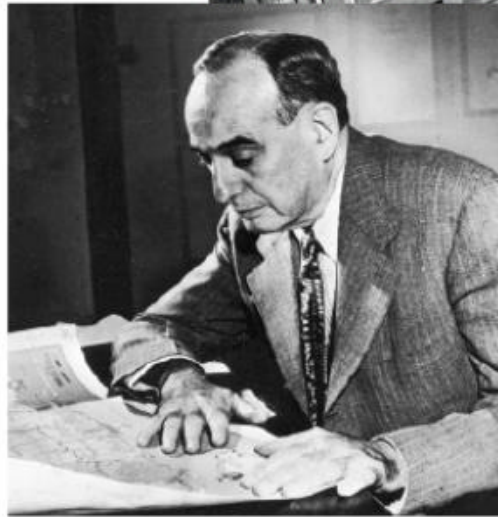
"Condemnation" is what happened to Susette Kelo's property, before the government took it.

**B**UT AGAIN, THIS TACTIC didn't just start happening in 2005, and to white people. We can go all the way back to the creation of Central Park a century and a half earlier and find the same tactics at play. An enormous park measuring 775 acres (today the park is actually 843 acres) in the middle of the island was not actually the first plan for an open green space in New York City. The first suggested site was a parcel of land, about 150 acres, along the East River between what is now 66th Street and 75th Street, known as Jones's Wood. In 1851, the New York State Assembly and Senate both passed resolutions to take the Jones's Wood property through eminent domain. It was happening.

But the wealthy white landowners—John Jones's heirs, and another wealthy New York family, the Schermerhorns, whose property was included in some of the proposals for the park—didn't want to sell the land. Understand, neither the Joneses nor the Schermerhorns lived on the property full-time; this was the 1850s, and the Upper East Side might as well have been a Mars colony. The Joneses' and the Schermerhorns' primary residences were downtown, where any self-respecting wealthy New Yorker would live. These people just didn't want to sell their undeveloped "country" estates uptown to the city for a public works project. So the families sued New York State to block the state's taking of their land.

Did I mention that the Joneses and the Schermerhorns were white? They were white. And since they were white, all of the stuff I said earlier about the foundational principles of state sovereignty that eminent domain rests on, all of the stuff I said about how, legally speaking, the concept of eminent domain is so ingrained in the very conception of property that you scarcely need constitutional language acknowledging it, all of that stuff comes with the caveat of "unless you are wealthy and white."

Of course, the Joneses and the Schermerhorns won their lawsuit against the state. Of course they did. A court ruled that the state resolution



to acquire the property through eminent domain violated the due process rights of rich white people. Apparently the resolution allowed the state to back out of the deal but didn't allow the Joneses and the Schermerhorns the same right. I'd point out that of course the Joneses and the Schermerhorns had no right to "back out" of the deal, because the state was using its unquestionable sovereign power to force the families into taking the "deal" whether they liked it or not,

but now I'm just shaking my fist at white judges who have been dead for 150 years.

And so, instead of displacing two white families who didn't even use their land as their primary residence, the city went forward with a new plan that included displacing over 200 Black people in Seneca Village who had built up an independent Black community on some of the only land they were allowed to purchase. All of the tricks that would later be deployed against Black communities in the 20th century were used against the people of Seneca Village in the 19th century. The newspapers called their land a "swamp." The media called the people living there "squatters" (even though, again, 20 percent of the Black homeowners in all of New York City lived there), and, of course, the papers referred to their community as a "n\*\*\*er village."

The residents of Seneca Village also went to court to object to the government taking their land, but unlike the wealthy white families, they lost in court every time. The landowners were paid an average of \$700 per lot. Andrew Williams, that shoe shiner turned landowner who bought the first lots from the Whiteheads, was paid \$2,335 for his three lots and house, even though he initially asked for \$3,500 in "just compensation." Even when taking his land and destroying the community he helped to found, the state couldn't be bothered to pay the man what he asked for.

The Time Warner Center is a relatively recent construction that sits right at the southwestern entrance to Central Park. It sits on about two acres of land and is valued at approximately \$1.5 billion.

New York City should go and find all the descendants of Seneca Village and pay them what their land is actually worth. I bet the government would be more cautious and fair when using its power of eminent domain if the compensation were ever just. **N**

**Moses's domain:** Left, Robert Moses studies a map in 1958; above, the remains of San Juan Hill, the neighborhood he erased to make way for Lincoln Center, seen rising in the background.

**All the tricks that would be deployed against Black communities in the 20th century were used against Seneca Village in the 19th.**

A close-up portrait of Zohran Mamdani, a man with dark hair and a beard, smiling slightly. He is wearing a red shirt with a yellow and green floral pattern. The background is dark and out of focus.

**Socialist in the streets:** In 2021, Zohran Mamdani took office as the New York State assemblymember for the 36th District, which encompasses Astoria and parts of Long Island City in Queens.

# When Socialists Govern

New York State Assemblymember  
Zohran Mamdani is building  
power in Queens.

BY HADAS THIER

**J**UST OVER FIVE YEARS AGO, WHEN LEAH MCVEIGH moved to Astoria, a neighborhood in the New York City borough of Queens, one of the first things she noticed about her apartment building was the dangerous intersection next to it. There were so many car crashes, she told me, that she learned to identify the sound of one: “There’s this specific crunch. And then quiet.”

There seemed to be an accident every week, and the constant honking suggested that there were dozens of near misses every day. It was so dangerous that she bought a large first aid kit to keep in the apartment. She also called the city’s 311 help line to request that a traffic light be installed, and when that didn’t work, she attended her community board meeting to see if they could help. Nothing changed, and McVeigh concluded that she’d done what she could. “I had to live my life. I had to go work. I’ve kicked the tires, and I’ve only lived here six months. Surely someone in this neighborhood has been trying to deal with this for years,” she said.

But one rainy night in September 2020, McVeigh heard that familiar, dreadful crunch and quiet. She ran down into the pouring rain in her slippers and found a delivery worker on the ground with a line of blood trickling from his mouth. “You could

tell, as soon as you got there, that it was not going to go well for him,” she said.

McVeigh watched him die. She decided then that getting the intersection fixed would be her “raison d’être.” This man was deeply loved, she told me. His friends and family brought a band to play a funeral brass section at the intersection. They put up a poster at the site of his death and lit candles almost every night for the next six months.

McVeigh e-mailed every legislator at

**“Maybe this is not only how I can get my traffic light, but I can also ensure that others don’t have the same experience that I did.”**

—Leah McVeigh,  
Astoria resident

*Hadas Thier is the author of A People’s Guide to Capitalism: An Introduction to Marxist Economics.*

**“Yes, we wanted sewers in the workers’ homes; but we wanted much, oh, so very much more than sewers.”**

—Emil Seidel,  
Milwaukee mayor (1910-12)

That changed last January, when Zohran Mamdani, one of six democratic socialists to win state office in New York, became the assemblymember representing Astoria. He hosted a Covid-19 town hall meeting over Zoom, which McVeigh attended. “He said a lot of good things,” she told me, and he invited participants to volunteer with his office to help deliver constituent services to their neighbors. This work entails assisting hundreds of constituents who reach out to the assemblymember with practical needs: an unmet unemployment claim, a complaint to the city that has not been addressed, or dozens of other unique problems. McVeigh thought, “Maybe this is how I will not only get my traffic light, but I can also ensure that others don’t have the same experience that I did.”

She got involved with Mamdani’s team in March, and with the help of another volunteer, his office made sure a traffic light and pedestrian signals were finally installed at the intersection by the end of that summer. The corner by her apartment building, once raucous with honking, fender benders, and worse, has gone quiet.

This is “sewer socialism” in action, and it highlights how local, socialist governance can be responsive to ordinary people rather than to the corporate and political elite.

## Sewer Socialism

“SEWER SOCIALISTS” WAS THE NICKNAME GIVEN TO THE DEMOCRATIC socialist mayors who ran Milwaukee for most of the first half of the 20th century. They built parks, playgrounds, libraries, water treatment plants, and the nation’s first municipal public housing. There were also socialist mayors in Reading, Penn.; Schenectady, N.Y.; Berkeley, Calif.; and dozens of other cities. But Milwaukee’s mayors were the best-known. In fact, Mayor Daniel Webster Hoan was featured on *Time* magazine’s cover in 1936. The article noted that the “Marxist mayor” was in his sixth term despite the united opposition of the city’s Republicans, Democrats, bankers, and landlords. Hoan, *Time* wrote, “remains one of the nation’s ablest public servants, and under him Milwaukee has become perhaps the best-governed city in the U.S.”

the city and state level, telling them, “I need this intersection fixed. I don’t have the emotional capacity to watch another person die in front of my house during Covid-19. This is too hard.” But every elected politician she reached out to either didn’t respond or told her that they couldn’t do anything to help.

That changed last January, when Zohran Mamdani, one of six democratic socialists to win state office in New York, became the assemblymember representing Astoria. He hosted a Covid-19 town hall meeting over Zoom, which McVeigh attended. “He said a lot of good things,” she told me, and he invited participants to volunteer with his office to help deliver constituent services to their neighbors. This work entails assisting hundreds of constituents who reach out to the assemblymember with practical needs: an unmet unemployment claim, a complaint to the city that has not been addressed, or dozens of other unique problems. McVeigh thought, “Maybe this is how I will not only get my traffic light, but I can also ensure that others don’t have the same experience that I did.”

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**Making the light:**  
Leah McVeigh in front of the traffic light that she and the rest of Mamdani’s team made sure was installed.

Milwaukee was a stronghold of the Socialist Party, particularly the wing that believed the best way to advance working-class power was to run a functional government that delivered basic services. But many from the party’s more radical wing derided this type of incremental reform. “Sewer socialism” was their term of scorn for the incrementalists. Emil Seidel, the city’s first socialist mayor, responded:

Some eastern smarties called ours a Sewer Socialism. Yes, we wanted sewers in the workers’ homes; but we wanted much, oh, so very much more than sewers. We wanted...a chance for every human being to be strong and live a life of happiness. And we wanted everything that was necessary to give them that: playgrounds, parks, lakes, beaches, clean creeks and rivers, swimming and wading pools, social centers, reading rooms, clean fun, music, dance, song and joy for all.

Today’s Eastern smarties include a caucus of democratic socialists in the New York State Legislature who have adopted many of these ideas. “So often,” Mamdani told me, “people like to malign leftists as if we live in the clouds. But we should also live in the sewers.”

A growing number of socialist politicians have organized their offices to deliver constituent services. But what makes their approach distinct is that they’re doing this by activating community members, developing leaders, and building organizations—and thus transforming the political terrain of their districts. While local political machines have often traded constituent services for votes, democratic socialists have turned that model on its head by using the delivery of services to build power *outside* of their offices. Through contact with constituents, they’ve introduced people to grassroots organizations, trained volunteers, and connected people with resources and information.

Politicians ranging from US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to state assemblymembers like Mamdani in Queens and Phara Souffrant Forrest in Brooklyn have developed significant volunteer bases out of this work, and in so doing, they are building infrastructure that can outlast their time in office. As Mamdani told me: “Our role is to ensure that people have the tools that they need to create the world that they deserve, outside of what we do for them, and long after we leave.”

By building volunteer networks and local organizations, explained Ayat Husseini, the community liaison for Mamdani’s office, they’re showing residents how socialist governance connects to communities and grassroots movements. “We can use constituent services



to empower volunteers and constituents,” she said. “They learn about the system, learn to resolve their issues moving forward, but also resolve their *neighbors’* issues and develop tight-knit communities that can navigate systems and bureaucracies.”

## Building Neighborhood Power

**M**AMDANI AND HIS staff of four (three full-time, one part-time) have spent the past year working with tenants and unemployed people, doing outreach in mosques and churches, and lending support to grassroots campaigns. Like other socialists in office, Mamdani describes himself as having “one hand in legislation, one hand in organizing, and one hand in constituent issues.”

That may sound like one too many hands for a single person, but his staff and volunteers help in each of those categories. When I stopped by the office’s constituent services volunteer meeting this past October, Mamdani sat to the side for most of the evening while his team ran the agenda. Mamdani, who had turned 30 that week, was wearing a dark suit and was uncharacteristically quiet. If he looked tired, I later found out, it was because he had begun a hunger strike earlier that day, in solidarity with New York City taxi workers who were seeking debt relief. The following week, still on hunger strike, Mamdani announced a major organizing victory: The state’s Department of Environmental Conservation had rejected a proposal that he’d worked to defeat, which would have built a fracked gas power plant in Astoria.

But many of the day-to-day functions of Mamdani’s office are not the flashy accomplishments that find their way into headlines. Mamdani and his staff respond to hundreds of constituents every week, answering e-mails, phone calls, and tweets. It’s not unusual for the office to receive 100 e-mails and 30 phone calls in a single day. During the first 10 months of Mamdani’s tenure, more than 480 of these conversations became active cases—an average of 11 cases per week. Some types of cases were all too common: a wave of people not receiving their unemployment checks at the height of the state’s lockdown, for instance. Others were unique: a security guard at risk of losing his job because his license had expired and his attempt



to renew it was stuck in a bureaucratic limbo. Many were somewhere in between: tenants complaining about negligent landlords or traffic issues like McVeigh’s intersection.

Mamdani and his staff were quickly overwhelmed by the volume of cases, particularly as the pandemic pummeled New York City and the inquiries became dire. So they set about recruiting and organizing volunteers. The first cohort that spring, which included McVeigh, fluctuated between five and 20 active volunteers. They learned to answer calls and e-mails, log information, and follow up where they could. McVeigh took the lead in helping to organize them. “I’m a bit of a systems thinker,” she said. She worked with the staff to tighten an initial “loosey-goosey” approach with schedules, processes, and clear expectations for volunteers.

She also met Sean Rowden, who had agreed to volunteer after the office helped him with his own unemployment case. He happened to have a background in urban planning and transportation and knew the liaison at the Department of Transportation. He helped resolve McVeigh’s traffic light case.

Mamdani and his staff have tried to use every point of contact with constituents to democratize and build power within the district. During Ramadan, their food distribution activities culminated in an iftar where religious leaders, community members, and local climate activists shared a meal, prayed, and discussed the struggle to stop the proposed fracked gas plant. When a constituent contacts the office to say “I don’t have gas” or “My landlord won’t repair the holes in my walls,” Mamdani’s staff often end up finding out about other issues that they can help resolve.

**Mapping change:** Zohran Mamdani, center, and his staff analyze a map of Queens.

**“It’s just really good to work with people that have your best interest at heart.”**

—Adriana Alvarez, Astoria resident

**Tenant activist:**  
Adriana Alvarez  
is working with  
Mamdani's office  
to organize her  
neighbors against  
their landlord.

**“Because you’re  
dealing with your actual  
neighbors, you don’t  
have the luxury of  
retreating into bubbles.”**

—Sean Rowden,  
a volunteer in Mamdani’s office

also meant that door locks and security cameras were broken, leaks were left to fester, garbage was everywhere, a mouse infestation hadn’t been addressed, and many tenants—they learned after some digging—were vastly overpaying on their rent.

Now Alvarez, Layachi, and their neighbors have begun to organize, and they’re bringing a building-wide legal case against the landlord. In the past, tenants occasionally passed each other in the hallway but had barely known one another. Now, Layachi told me, “we’re like a family. We help each other out, we talk outside, we know about each other’s kids.”

Layachi is a natural organizer, who recently helped unionize his workplace. But Alvarez said she’s never done anything like this before. When I asked her how it felt, she said, “It’s like a breath of fresh air. I didn’t know how many people in my building didn’t want to speak out because of their status. It sounds ignorant, but as a citizen, I never really thought about it. It feels good to know that we’re working together now. That they know that their neighbors have their back.”

Neither Layachi nor Alvarez consider themselves “political” or have an opinion about democratic socialism. “It’s just really good to work with people that have your best interest at heart,” Alvarez said.

It’s exactly this principle—that socialist governance is just *good* governance—that appeals to volunteers like McVeigh and Rowden. Both told me that they have socialist leanings, but they appreciate the seemingly apolitical nature of providing constituent services. “There’s something

That’s how they met Adriana Alvarez, who was born and raised in Queens. In 2019 Alvarez, her partner, and her two daughters moved into a rent-stabilized apartment. They quickly found out that there was no working stove, and when they called Con Edison to turn on the gas, they were told it wasn’t possible, because the building’s gas pipes were not installed according to city regulations. The landlord refused to do anything about it, so in March 2020 Alvarez took him to court. There she learned that a standing order to address the issue already existed. To this day, nothing has been done to correct it. In fact, the only thing that came out of the court case was that Con Ed shut off the gas to the rest of the building as well.

Alvarez didn’t know the people in her new building when this began. But her neighbor across the hall, Hacene Layachi, seemed to know everyone. He suggested that she go to a nearby food pantry where he’d met some organizers who might help. As it turned out, the organizers were Mamdani supporters and members of the Astoria Tenants Union. Mamdani’s campaign had been running food distribution during Ramadan and had enlisted the ATU to hand out flyers.

As Alvarez and the ATU identified other neighbors’ issues, Mamdani’s office got involved. Not only had the tenants’ gas been shut off indefinitely, but years of negligence

powerful about neighbors helping neighbors,” McVeigh said.

Rowden has been skeptical of the Democratic Socialists of America and of political activism in general in an age of Twitter wars. “Everything’s online; everything’s national scale. And it feels insubstantial,” he said. But with constituent services, “because you’re dealing with real people in real circumstances—your actual neighbors—you don’t have the luxury of retreating into bubbles and hive minds.”

The more that Mamdani’s office can develop leaders, whether as volunteers or as tenants organizing their buildings, the more institutional knowledge can be built to outlast the tenure of individual politicians. “We care very deeply about democratizing information,” Mamdani said. “I think that stems from the fact that we are socialists, and socialism is in many ways the extension of democracy beyond the ballot box.” It is in this sense that socialist governance is not *only* good governance; it has a broader goal of transforming the way people understand and relate to the government. “The reason that I ran for office,” Mamdani continued, “is to change the relationship between people and the state, to shift what people believe they deserve from the state, and to help them understand the structural problems and the role that they can play in challenging those structures.”

As Kaarthika Thakker, Mamdani’s communications coordinator and constituent services liaison, explained: “The ultimate goal is to identify and develop leaders and to give people the tools and knowledge to be able to have tenant association meetings, regardless of who is in office, to understand what your rights are and what you can demand from your landlord, your candidate, your government. The ultimate goal is to have that sustain itself and live within the neighborhood and not within our office.”

## A Gospel of Abundance

**D**EMOCRATIC SOCIALIST POLITICIANS like Mamdani don’t have it easy. Not only are they opposed on the ballot (often by candidates with nearly bottomless resources), but once they’re in office, they’re stymied by limited resources and the enormous scale of the challenges their constituents face.

“We are preaching a gospel of abundance within conditions of austerity,” Mamdani said. Constituent service work exists only “because the system is not working efficiently. If people were able to resolve their issues with government agencies directly,



they would have no need to call us.”

To get constituents engaged, Mamdani and his staff must convince them that it is possible to make change—in their own lives and in their communities. When they organized thousands of residents to write postcards against the fracked gas plant, they made it clear: “You can do this. You have the power to stop this plan.”

But “when you light the fire of possibility in someone,” Mamdani cautioned, you have to do so responsibly and “not give them a sense of hope when actually there’s no way to help them in this situation.” For every constituent that Mamdani’s team helps, there are many more who don’t know to reach out to his office or whose problems are beyond the ability of a single office to solve. Behind each negligent landlord, for instance, is an entire system of real estate development, predatory lending, and gentrification—which requires legislation and class-based struggles to effectively overcome. Delivering constituent services not only gives Mamdani opportunities to empower residents; it also informs his legislative priorities, such as a “good cause” eviction law to protect renters, a bill to ban all new power plants, and legislation that democratizes the processes in the most engaged state agencies.

Political education is also important in the

**“If you’re a socialist, part of the project of getting people on board is showing them the goods.”**

—Sean Rowden

long run, Mamdani said. “When we talk to our constituents, we try to be honest with them” about the political and systemic challenges. “There are many obstacles that are unseen, and you need to know them. Because if you don’t connect the dots in politics, it seems like you can never achieve change. And that’s what they want you to think.”

Sewer socialism in New York is in its beginning stages. How far it will go and how much it can achieve remains to be seen. For Rowden, despite his skepticism about political activity, the work that’s happening in Mamdani’s district is a “North Star” for the movement. “If you’re a socialist, part of the project of getting people on board is showing people the goods,” he said. “That’s the benefit of getting your fingers in the dirt. What we’re doing here is where the hope lies for socialism to grow.” **N**



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## The Galaxies Within

*Claudio Lomnitz's family history*

BY ILAN STAVANS

**M**

OST WRITERS ARE CONTENT TO WRITE A book once; others, after publishing a first version, go back and rewrite it over and over again. Sometimes they do so out of aesthetic dissatisfaction. But there is another type of writer (let's call them "translinguals") who returns to a book time and again in order to rewrite it in a different language. In a way, translingual writers might be seen as their own translators, although the term doesn't quite fit because these writers don't simply render their original work into another language; they rewrite it in a peculiar way, creating another original. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, they

ILLUSTRATION BY LILY QIAN



inhabit—or, better, are inhabited by—different iterations of who they are; each version of their book represents a different self.

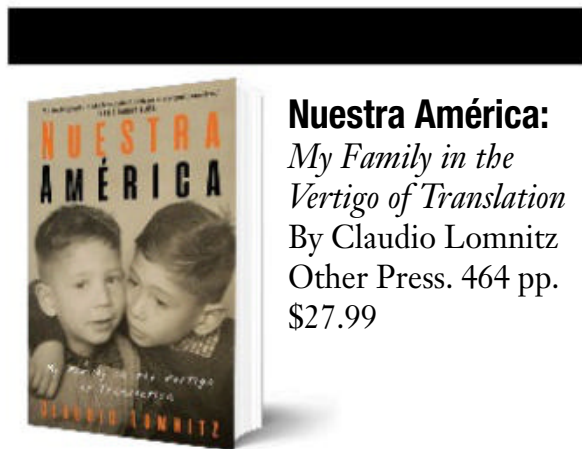
Claudio Lomnitz, who teaches history and anthropology at Columbia and is interested in the family in Latin America as an economic and political unit as well as a fantasy, is such a writer. Born in Chile, he descends from a rich tapestry of Jewish communists, intellectuals, scientists, educators, and political activists (many of them translingual, like Lomnitz himself), who are the subject of his memoir, *Nuestra América*.

Published in Mexico in 2018, the Spanish edition was 332 pages and juxtaposed disquisitions on Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement, anti-Semitism in Europe, and the plight of Ashkenazi Jews in Latin America throughout the 20th century with the history of Latin America itself—in particular, the histories of Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico. Since the topic of Jewish culture remains the domain of a small audience in Spanish, the Spanish edition expanded those horizons, often at the expense of Latin American themes. Most readers would have recognized, for example, how *Nuestra América's* title was an homage to José Martí's famous 1891 essay, in which the Cuban thinker and revolutionary martyr sought to unite the Americas under a single, anti-colonialist banner. They likely could also identify many of the Latin American thinkers and radicals Lomnitz's ancestors rubbed elbows with, such as the influential Indigenous philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui, the author of *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* and a philo-Semite who established Perú's Socialist Party and founded the journal *Amauta* in the 1920s to discuss socialism and culture.

Though much of the Jewish content remains in the English version of *Nuestra América*, published by Other Press, the book in many ways dances to a different beat. At 464 pages, it caters to American readers, offering more intricate histories of Latin American politics and culture as well as a far more intimate portrait of Lomnitz's family. The author's English-language style also stands in stark contrast to his Spanish one: It has a melodious rhythm, and the sentences are shorter and more focused. This might be because of the US tradition of in-house editing, but it appears that the rewriting also honed and sharpened Lomnitz's prose.

Other intriguing differences emerge between the two versions, almost like two divergent Rembrandt self-portraits. The cover of the Spanish edition features a stunning black-and-white photo of Lomnitz's maternal grandfather, Misha Adler, who witnessed firsthand the upheaval of East European Jews, with an Indigenous person who likely witnessed firsthand the upheaval of his own com-

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**Nuestra América:**  
*My Family in the  
Vertigo of Translation*  
By Claudio Lomnitz  
Other Press. 464 pp.  
\$27.99

munities at the same time. The message is clear: The book's theme, as the author himself puts it, is "the relationship between the exaltation of 'the Indian' and the destruction of Europe." The cover of the English version is more intimate: It shows a home photo of Lomnitz with his older brother Jorge, who died in 1993. The US edition, while filling in the potential gaps in the reader's knowledge of Latin America, also offers a more domestic narrative. That, after all, is what Americans like in memoirs: a fast track to the domestic realm.

Another way to compare the two versions is through their subtitles. The Spanish one is *Utopía y Persistencia en Una Familia Judía* and emphasizes how Lomnitz's family, like many other Jewish families in the post-Haskalah stage (the period immediately after the Jewish Enlightenment), embraced radical politics and cosmopolitanism. The English subtitle, *My Family in the Vertigo of Translation*, foreshadows a different story: One less about a utopianism that supplanted religiosity than about how Lomnitz's family found itself caught between languages. In the introductory section, Lomnitz talks of the way his polyglot family (he brings up the concept of "panglossia") collectively spoke about a dozen tongues, some more actively than others, including Ger-

man, Spanish, Yiddish, Hebrew, English, Russian, Romanian, and French. But he also discusses what he calls "alingualism," the condition of being left out of a language that others around you speak. His father, the geologist Cinna Lomnitz, a *yequé* (or German Jew) known for his 1974 book *Global Tectonics and Earthquake Risk* as well as the so-called Lomnitz law, which is used to understand the viscosity of rocks, didn't teach his son German. Meanwhile his mother, Larissa Adler, a famous anthropologist in Mexico who was raised in an Ashkenazi family (she was the oldest daughter of Misha and Noemí Adler), never taught her son Yiddish or Hebrew, perhaps because Jewish history made her feel alien, disconnected. For most of his life, Lomnitz writes, he has remained sandwiched between Spanish and English, feeling comfortable to a certain point in either but also insecure in both. "Spanish is my Yiddish, and English is my Esperanto," he explains, "but I have always lacked the perfect language: the one that names things without distorting them. For there is not, nor can there be, a language of paradise such as those possessed by the truly great writers, who make their home in their language. My mother tongue is a linguistic shipwreck; and it is from there that I write the story of my grandparents."

"Vertigo" is an exquisitely poetic way to represent language as both an anchor and a trampoline. In Lomnitz's narrative there are Yiddishists, Hebraists, Esperantists, Hispanicists, Anglicists, and other obsessives. Switching tongues allows them to reinvent themselves in different milieus, but it also confuses them to the point of unsteadiness.

**L**omnitz begins his story with his grandparents—and in particular with Misha Adler, the one who appears on the cover of the Spanish edition. Born in 1904 in Bessarabia, which is today part of Moldova and Ukraine, Adler spent his life on a globe-trotting odyssey in search of a satisfying radical politics. Misha's wife, Noemí Milstein, born in 1911 in Mogilev, a district of Podolia, Ukraine, was a politically committed companion on this odyssey. Another passionate intellectual, she belonged to the left-leaning Zionist youth organization Hashomer Hatzair and was part

of the circle of socialists and radicals gathered around José Carlos Mariátegui, who was then forming Peru's Socialist Party. Lomnitz follows them, separately and together, from Novo Sulitza, near Czernowitz, to cities like Vienna, Paris, Santiago, Cali, Bogotá, Medellín, Caracas, and Haifa.

In Peru during the reign of the dictator Augusto B. Leguía, the couple edited a short-lived magazine under Mariátegui's mentorship called *Repertorio Hebreo*, and in Colombia they were connected with another, *Nuevo Mundo*, which also published a handful of issues. The pair were lofty in their aspirations: Lomnitz talks about Misha's correspondence with Sigmund Freud and Waldo Frank and Latin American intellectuals like Gabriela Mistral, Manuel Ugarte, and especially Samuel Glusberg, a prominent Argentine Jewish editor who converted to Catholicism (his adopted name was Enrique Espinoza, after Heine and Spinoza) and with whom Misha maintained an incisive dialogue on Jewish-Latin American identity. Being itinerant was for Misha and Noemí a proof of their cosmopolitanism and a way to escape the narrowness of identity, but that did not mean they were reluctant to embrace either their Jewishness or their Latin Americanness. In a 1965 notebook, Misha wrote that "Americanism and Judaica...have ended up harmonizing and fusing into one another in my intimate thoughts and feelings, to such a degree that they have been reduced to one." The couple's itinerancy was far from being exclusively political; in fact, it was a matter of necessity. In 1930, four months after Mariátegui's death, a coup in Peru brought down the country's liberal president, Augusto Leguía. The new junta was anti-communist and xenophobic. Soon after, Misha's and Noemí's applications for citizenship were denied. They were expelled and forced to move once again from one country to the next.

Lomnitz parades a cast of dozens of other relatives, all the way back to great-grandparents like Shloma "Sina" Aronsfrau, who was born in Bukovina in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1859 and murdered in Mannheim, in southwestern Germany, in 1922 by anti-Semitic nationalist terrorists with close connections to the Nazi Party. Lomnitz also looks at Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, an Austrian

aristocrat, member of the SS, and a founding figure in Colombian anthropology who was also interested in the "Indian question in South America." Reichel-Dolmatoff's writing on Indigenous tribes in the Amazon (his books include *Yurupari: Studies of an Amazonian Foundation Myth* and *Indians of Colombia: Experience and Cognition*) was not all that different from Lomnitz's own communist relatives' interest in pre-Columbian cosmogonies. While not actually articulating it, Lomnitz's book poses a probing question to its readers: Were Reichel-Dolmatoff's fascist views on indigeneity and Lomnitz's relatives' utopian ones linked at the core in the way they tried to understand Indigenous culture from the viewpoint of European psychology, religion, and politics?

In a couple of places, Lomnitz states that he wrote his memoir for his two children, Enrique and Elisa. This "domestic" angle gives both the Spanish and English versions a schmaltzy quality, tangible in the assortment of family photographs featured throughout the book. Yet these images also feel organic. After all, Lomnitz is first and foremost a historian who studies the many ways in which people react to their circumstances and how family is often at the center of these reactions. There's a family tree, a map, and copious bibliographical notes in the book's back matter. (An index would also have been useful.) That is to say, Lomnitz's own family—the real and the imagined—has been turned into a subject of scientific research.

**A**utobiography is a difficult genre to balance. It conceals as much as it reveals. It doesn't have to be confessional in nature. It must give the impression that the author is in control, although the best memoirs are those in which the reader realizes how precarious and foolish this objective is. Lomnitz is humble in this regard: He constantly recognizes how much he doesn't know about his family. The best sections of this book, in fact, are those that dramatize Lomnitz's incapacity to fill in the gaps or that engage with how all autobiography is, in one way or another, a

work of fiction. Indeed, if *Nuestra América* has a failing, it is the way it overwhelms its readers with detail. Lomnitz is punctilious to such an extent that the details about Misha and Noemí's journey feel numbing. Does every cameo need a full Wikipedia-like detour? The accumulation can be almost encyclopedic at times: Lomnitz reaches out to everyone he can think of for information about minutiae. Even though what he finds is masterfully arranged, the plot (if the volume can be said to have one) keeps on twisting and turning.

There are hardly any droll sections, any quiet transitions. Instead, there is an abundance of tangential figures making an appearance, sometimes only as a reference, at other times in more vigorous ways. Lomnitz speaks of living

in Berlin on the same street as Walter Benjamin. His grandmother sings in a concert conducted by Bruno Walter. He discusses the anti-Semitic legacy of Mircea Eliade, quotes Pablo Neruda, and debates Hannah Arendt's writing. He places his family in celebrated kibbutzim in Israel or connects them to important members of the Knesset, such as Hannah Lamdan and Yitzhak Ben-Aharon. It is all very dizzying. The assassination of Boris Milstein, Lomnitz's other paternal great-grandfather—a death surrounded in mystery—serves up a dollop of suspense. But the tension in these sections is finally dissipated by the onslaught of data.

On Jewish history, *Nuestra América* can sometimes feel misguided. Perhaps because of his obsession with the crossroads where politics and daily life meet (the book opens with an epigraph from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* about discovering "the secret of the holy family," which "must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice"), and because Lomnitz isn't, as he puts it, a specialist in Jewish history, he does not often engage in a meaningful way with questions of Jewish religion. He portrays Jews as creatures "confined, identified, and punished" in the Christian lands they inhabit, "but also protected so that they could carry out the theological role of the condemned witness: always present but never invited to the banquet. Someone is always re-

**Autobiography can conceal as much as it reveals, especially when family is involved.**

quired to envy whatever is deemed to be normal, because normality can scarcely justify itself on its own.” And he neglects the fact that European and Latin American Jews have a rich religious tradition. At least in part, this is doubtless because Lomnitz’s family didn’t introduce him to any theological realms—which is too bad, since in Peru, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, Jewish religious as well as secular life has flourished, and its exploration would only have deepened his book.

**N**uestra América overcomes its limitations, however, by doing something that historians seldom know how to accomplish: turn the scientific eye onto themselves. Lomnitz is serene, steady, and unemotional in his delivery. He makes the reader feel that each of our lives is a galaxy with countless entities. While individuals are obviously important in families, their actions are part of a whole. And it is the whole that matters to Lomnitz: not a self-portrait but a group one. This crucial message comes across especially in his affectionate, indebted depiction of his mother, Larissa Lomnitz. When I was

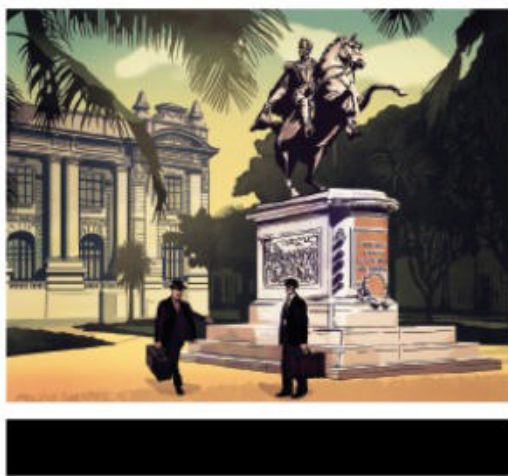
growing up in Copilco, in the southern part of Mexico City, near UNAM, the national university, I knew that the Lomnitz family lived a few blocks away, although I don’t remember spending time with them. Larissa, a French-born Chilean, was admired by my mother as a trailblazing ethnographer. She had earned her bachelor’s degree at Berkeley and her doctorate at Universidad Iberoamericana (where my mother and I taught) and was on the faculty at UNAM. Her interests moved along the lines of Oscar Lewis’s in *The Children of Sanchez*, a book about the ways a poor Mexican family responded to its environment and the death of its patriarch that I was mesmerized by in my youth. (Claudio Lomnitz wrote an introduction in Spanish to its 50th-anniversary edition.)

Larissa was attracted to similar themes

but was far more academic in her tone. I remember reading about her fieldwork in Cerrada del Cóndor, a shantytown of about 200 houses in Mexico City not too far from Copilco. Lomnitz, whose *Death and the Idea of Mexico* follows closely in his mother’s footsteps, has more global aspirations—first, because he performs his career bilingually, connecting with two distinct, at times heterogeneous readerships, something I don’t believe Larissa succeeded at by comparison. And second, because Lomnitz has devoted his energy to bridging the gap between the academic milieu and the public sphere. He is captivated by the intersection of history, politics, and day-to-day affairs, and he reflects on that intersection not only in scholarly volumes but in the regular columns he writes for the left-leaning newspaper *La Jornada*.

Composed “in exile” in New York, Lomnitz’s autobiography is an invitation to look at the past and present of Latin American Jewish life with depth and complexity. Talking about columns of a different sort, at one point he refers to what he calls “the column syndrome.” As he looks at his family sub specie aeternitatis, a particular member “props up, buffers, protects, and endures,” allowing others to co-

alesce as a group. This, he says, is a trait especially visible among Jews, given their propensity to catastrophe. “The role of the column,” Lomnitz adds, “comes with a communicative function—to be a source of practical wisdom, to be sure, but also to temper or soften news so that fear doesn’t spin into vertigo and paralysis, so that depression doesn’t become overwhelming, and blows don’t prove fatal.” By detailing the intricacies of his own, labyrinthine family, *Nuestra América*, in its two complimentary versions, turns Lomnitz himself into an exemplary column, thanks to whom it is possible to discern patterns in the never-ending, multilingual, transnational trek that is modern Jewish diasporic existence—the ultimate sense of which, it goes without saying, will always be beyond us. **N**



**Lomnitz does what historians seldom know how to accomplish: turn the scientific eye onto themselves.**



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# The Market's Specter

*China between capitalism and communism*

BY ANDREW B. LIU

**T**HE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE SEEN A NEW TURN IN THE RELATIONSHIP between the People's Republic of China and the rest of the world. In the early 2000s, as China entered the World Trade Organization and made preparations for its first-ever Olympics, outsiders were optimistic that it would assimilate into a US-led world order, embracing global markets and retiring its old socialist economy. But those rosy predictions have faded since the 2008 financial crisis and the 2013 ascension of Xi Jinping as leader of the Chinese Communist Party. The idea of endless growth avowed by American liberals in the 1990s has been replaced by the zero-sum logic that China's success will come at the expense of others. True or not, China has been successful: Its economy has continued to grow, not only from global trade but also through government-financed debt and infrastructure investment, both at home and abroad in

Asia, Africa, and the Americas. That China has embraced such an approach instead of the austerity programs and free market policies of the former Soviet states has made it clear to leaders in the United States and the European Union that China has emerged in the 21st century not only as a trading partner and an ally but as a potential rival.

The emergence of a new era also suggests the end of an old one. In the future, we may look back on the Covid-19 pandemic

and attendant US-China hostilities as the culmination of China's four-decade-long economic ascent, which began in the late 1970s with the death of Mao Zedong and the political coronation of Deng Xiaoping. At the same time that much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America stagnated under policies of austerity and deregulation, China has undergone an unprecedented transformation from third world country to global power. Much of the credit is given to Deng, who oversaw a new set of economic policies known as *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening), dismantling the agrarian commune system in favor of a household responsibility system and opening coastal cities to trade and investment. But as is made clear by two new books, Jason Kelly's *Market Maoists* and Isabella Weber's *How China Escaped Shock Therapy*, the real story is far more complex. Positioning China's economic development and reintegration in longer historical terms, both books argue that the architects of China's socialist economy had long experimented with and borrowed from mixed economic systems from around the world. The "new" China is, in fact, much older: Widening the cast of characters beyond Mao and Deng to other factions within the state, Kelly and Weber show how China's political economy was shaped by vibrant internal debates and profound intellectual shifts over multiple generations, complicating received views about the contours of Chinese communism.

Both books highlight concrete policies that defy the stereotypes of the so-called "high socialist" period from the 1950s to the '70s and the subsequent era of market reform. Kelly demonstrates how market-oriented policies during the Mao era created the precedents for subsequent internationalization. From the 1940s on, the Hong Kong-Guangdong border became a crucial meeting point between China and the world market, and similar coastal hubs were central to the country's development strategies in the 1980s and '90s. Further, starting in the 1960s, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Trade experimented with export production bases that imported raw materials from overseas, refined them with local labor, and re-exported them abroad as higher-value-added goods, all in pursuit of foreign currency. This strategy was summed up in the phrase "*yijin yangchu*" ("use imports to cultivate exports") and presaged the 1990s shift toward export-oriented industrialization. Indeed, Kelly reminds us that many of the leaders

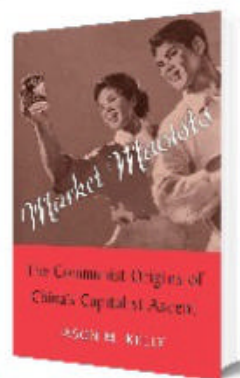
involved in the late-century reforms—the long-serving Premier Zhou Enlai, Central Committee member Chen Yun, and Minister of Finance Li Xiannian—were already experimenting with market-based solutions in the decades before the policies spearheaded by Deng and Premier Zhao Ziyang.

Conversely, Weber argues that Chinese leaders sought to retain substantial control over the economy in the 1980s—the same period, many now assume, that China uncritically joined an ascendant global neoliberal consensus. In Weber’s telling, China avoided the fate of other formerly socialist countries, with their extreme abdication to market forces, because of the efforts of Zhao and a circle of trusted young rural-minded economic reformers, who pushed for a dual-price-track system to develop China’s agriculture and heavy industries. Paradoxically, this decision to retain elements of a socialist economy helped sustain China’s rise as a capitalist power. Even today the Chinese state views the market primarily in instrumental terms—as Weber puts it, a “tool in the pursuit of its larger development goals”—thereby preserving a degree of economic sovereignty that distinguishes China from other powerful countries.

**M**arket Maoists focuses on the origins of China’s new economy and the Chinese Communist Party’s forays into international trade from 1949 to the late ’70s. Kelly casts his history in a decidedly post-Cold War framework by eschewing the idea of a strict rivalry between socialist and capitalist states. If one looks beyond political alliances and examines China’s actual policies, he argues, one finds a reality that was “less doctrinaire, more nuanced, and often ideologically promiscuous.” Notably, Kelly’s book is a history of the CCP and not the longer arc of Chinese history. The context of Qing- and Republican-era treaty ports and semicolonial trade remains absent, even if they shaped the outlook of the party’s first generation. Moreover, despite inviting reflection on the porousness of the categories “capitalism” and “socialism,” Kelly uses them as straightforward geopolitical terms to designate Cold War alliances, with little rumination on what they meant conceptually and how they overlapped in surprising ways.

Kelly’s concerns and strengths, rather, are archival ones. *Market Maoists* begins in Hong Kong in the 1930s and ’40s, when the city became a valuable gateway for the Chinese diaspora living overseas and a hub for the export of raw goods and the import of foreign currencies. Across the war with Japan (1937–1945) and the ensuing Civil War between the ruling Kuomintang nationalist party and the rebel Communists (1946–1949), the CCP set up an underground office in Hong Kong, then a British

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### Market Maoists:

*The Communist Origins of China's Capitalist Ascent*

By Jason M. Kelly

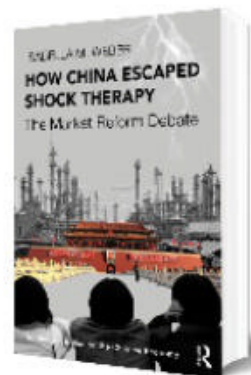
Harvard University Press. 320 pp. \$39.95

### How China Escaped Shock Therapy:

*The Market Reform Debate*

By Isabella M. Weber

Routledge. 358 pp. \$39.95



colony, and enlisted young cadres to create front companies, funneling supplies and money to its base in the north. Kelly offers captivating portraits of young Chinese operatives such as Liao Chengzhi and Qin Bangli, scions of the bourgeoisie who had crossed over to the other side. Repurposing their technical and business acumen to help sustain the rebel party thousands of miles away, the pair founded Liow and Company, which appeared to be a small trading firm. In 1948, with the CCP wearing down KMT forces in Manchuria, Liow and Company would be renamed China Resources, or Hua Run, and become a major state-owned holding company that to this day facilitates trade between the mainland, Hong Kong, and the rest of the world.

With these companies and connections, the CCP had begun, even before the People’s Republic was founded, to ship raw materials—primarily grains and soybeans—from Dalian, Manchuria, to

Hong Kong in order to exchange them for valuable supplies. The shipments traveled by train to the Korean peninsula, then aboard Soviet ships to Victoria Harbor. There, party cadres also took the time to visit the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) in the city center and unload several pounds of gold lining their vests.

Students of modern China will recognize that the early years of party rule in the 1940s and ’50s were marked by debates over how to gradually transition to communism. Mao contended that the People’s Republic should expand and instrumentalize capitalist development under party rule before shifting to socialism, a theory known as “new democracy.” Ruling over an impoverished country, CCP leaders understood that building a strong and independent China would require the money and resources then concentrated in the hands of a national bourgeoisie. Trade was no exception: In the 1940s, the Chinese government did not necessarily see the United States and its European allies as mortal rivals. Only with the outbreak of the Korean War, with US and Chinese forces pitted against each other, did hostile Cold War containment policies solidify in Asia. Afterward, the United States placed an embargo on Chinese goods and seized roughly \$42.5 million worth of Chinese assets in US banks. This only made Hong Kong more important to the People’s Republic, as the border with Guangdong became host to a lively black market for goods and a pipeline of refugees leaving China (as Peter Hamilton, Denise Ho, and Zhou Taomo’s new research explores).

Earlier, CCP officials had viewed trade in pragmatic terms, though for political reasons they remained secretive. With the embargo, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong understood the political expediency of loudly championing foreign commerce. In April 1952, Chinese representatives joined a major trade conference held in Moscow featuring 443 delegates from both “capitalist” and “socialist” countries. They actively pursued deals with France, West Germany, Pakistan, and Indonesia, among others, that would have totaled more than \$220 million (despite some deals ultimately being unsuccessful), proclaiming them as acts of internationalism against the “American imperialist policies of embargo and blockade.” In one comic scene, Chinese and British representatives in Geneva

years later silently slid slips of paper back and forth with lists of potential items for trade. The Chinese side pushed the UK to export goods that were forbidden under the US embargo, such as metals, ships, and vehicles, while the British side refused to budge beyond the agreed list of medicines and chemicals. The geopolitical subtext was understood by both parties but never voiced.

Though foreign trade represented less than 10 percent of China's GDP, the acquisition of foreign currencies and technologies proved essential to domestic projects. During the 1950s, Central Committee member Chen Yun helped design the country's first Five-Year Plan, which involved contracts for Soviet technology in exchange for Chinese raw goods. To supplement a shortage of foreign currency, local officials also held the first Canton Fair in 1957, attracting merchants from around the world to peruse Chinese silks, teas, and handicrafts. The fair continues to operate twice a year and was for many years a discreet lifeline to the global market.

**B**ut if so many elements for international activity were already in place by the 1950s, then what prevented Chen Yun and Zhou Enlai from more openly embracing world trade and capitalist practices until the 1970s? The simplest answer, for Kelly, is Mao Zedong.

After only a few years in operation, the Ministry of Foreign Trade had "much to be proud of," Kelly writes, noting that it had established relationships with 82 countries and regions. But this optimism was shattered when Mao spearheaded an economic campaign of rapid agricultural collectivization and industrialization, driven by moral incentives and mass mobilization, that would come to be known as the Great Leap Forward.

In Mao's vision, the Great Leap Forward would remedy the imbalances of the first Five-Year Plan by raising output in both city and country. In the campaign's frenzy and disorganization, however, large swaths of the countryside were left fallow and countless home metals were rendered useless in backyard furnaces. For the Ministry of Foreign

Trade, the Leap was a disaster that "sabotaged" its pro-trade policies. Agricultural shortfalls meant China could meet less than half of its export contracts, mainly for rice, wheat, and pork, and Mao's campaign also "uprooted the discipline and control that the Ministry of Foreign Trade had long sought to instill in its work," Kelly writes.

The Cultural Revolution, which began four years after the Great Leap Forward, proved equally disastrous. In the interregnum, the Ministry of Foreign Trade had begun importing grain from Canada and, with the end of the Chinese-Soviet alliance in 1960, pursued more deals with Australia, Europe, and

Japan. But these best-laid plans were once again foiled by a major Maoist campaign. This time, the trade numbers did not suffer greatly, but the Cultural Revolution laid waste to the bureaucracy, and several major figures in Kelly's story—including Qin Bangli, Ye Jizhuang, and Li Xiannian, party members who had helped carve out trade policies in earlier decades—were subsequently purged by the party or "struggled against" by revolutionary rebels.

Kelly acknowledges that there were many reasons why China embarked on the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, including the widening inequalities between city and country and between party and nonparty. Even so, for him the culpability lies mainly with Mao and his peculiar psychology—a familiar theme in China scholarship. The Cultural Revolution, Kelly argues, was the product of Mao's deteriorating mind and his fear of a diminished "legacy." Though Mao's concerns over the country's new class inequalities are acknowledged, they are framed as things that existed solely in his writings—the paranoid concerns of an aging leader. One does not get the sense, as the sociologists Joel Andreas and Wu Yiching have argued, that these campaigns developed out of objectively identifiable social contradictions specific to the socialist system.

Kelly is understandably more interested in the campaigns' outcomes than their initial logic. But by framing this history through the opposition between a practical, technocratic bureaucracy and its mad leader, he risks undermining his book's explanatory power. I came away from reading *Market Maoists* with the impression that

party officials were more or less secretly capitalist all along, championing the ideals of socialism and revolution only nominally or cynically. As a result, the subsequent economic liberalization no longer feels like the world-historical transition that it actually was, but rather an apolitical, almost inevitable continuation of the policies and programs led by Zhou, Chen, and others in the 1950s. Contrary to its title, then, Kelly's book pits Mao *against* the market: Rather than locate the "origins" of China's "capitalist ascent" in the socialist era, it views those early political ideals as a temporary roadblock against the ineluctable, natural march of the global economy.



**H**ow *China Escaped Shock Therapy*, by contrast, highlights not the continuity of China's capitalist ascent but the very real political disagreements that animated the first decade of Deng's "reform and opening." In the 1980s, many reformers embraced the advice of an emergent neoliberal orthodoxy that advocated the overnight liberalization of all prices within the Chinese economy—that is, unraveling the state's planned system of prices for all goods, from cigarettes and bicycles to petroleum and raw cotton. Price liberalization paired with fiscal austerity constituted a "package reform" that would later be adopted in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states in the 1980s under the title of "shock therapy." Had it come to pass in China, Weber argues, the results would have been equally disastrous, leading to hyperinflation, deindustrialization, and plummeting incomes.

Thankfully, a handful of young, pragmatic, rural-oriented Chinese reformers led a countermovement to persuade the state's top economic decision-maker, Premier Zhao Ziyang, to adopt a gradualist dual-track price system (*shuanggui zhi*). The industrial core of the socialist economy would remain under state price controls, while "nonessential" goods at the margins were gradually commodified, enabling China to maximize its economic potential. The tragic events of 1989, however, with mass state violence against students and workers in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, resulted in the political exile of Zhao and many of the young reformers, burying a valuable record of vibrant debate, even as the consequences of their policies helped secure China's ascent at the turn of the century.

Weber begins her book with a basic question: Why did the Chinese state decide to maintain price controls in an era seeking to unleash the market? In her view, there are many historical reasons as well as economic ones. She frames the debates of the 1980s in terms derived from the text *Guanzi*, from the seventh century BCE, which argued that in economic questions, one should distinguish between “light and heavy” goods (*qingzhong*): that is, between “heavy” essential goods, such as salt, grains, and silk, which the state has a duty to regulate, versus everything else, which officials could leave unprotected from market dynamics. Such principles grounded the economy of the 18th-century Qing Empire, for example, especially when it came to its regulation of massive granaries, the most elaborate famine-relief program in world history. “Light and heavy” principles, Weber suggests, influenced the two tracks of price reform in the 1980s as well.

Another source for the dual-price scheme came from modern times: US planners during World War II rationed and set prices on basic goods, and the new Chinese state, recovering from decades of war with Japan and civil war with the KMT, also fixed many prices in order to establish a new currency. In both cases, the problem was the exceptional hardships of war, which led to an overabundance of money in circulation that outpaced material goods. Rather than stimulate production, as neoclassical economics might argue, high demand combined with inelastic supplies meant prices would spiral upward endlessly and speculation and hoarding would overtake productive agriculture and industry. In China, the new state succeeded by prioritizing “heavy” or essential items, buying up grains and cloth and selling them at state-designated prices, cutting out speculators and restoring faith in the new currency, the renminbi. Thus, the price control strategies taken up by 1980s reformers could also be seen in multiple times and places throughout world history, neither uniquely Chinese nor exotic to modern economics.

**F**rom this historical survey, Weber next turns to the unresolved tensions in the socialist system that had built up over the decades before the 1980s. From the 1950s on, she notes, the CCP had implemented a state monopoly over the purchase and sale of agricultural goods, subsidizing urban industry by extracting surpluses from the countryside. The main method was the state’s “price scissors”—a term coined by Trotsky—which paid cheap prices for agricultural goods and sold industrial goods back to the peasantry at higher rates. Such exploitation invited peasant and labor protests throughout the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, forming the crucial economic context for the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution—structural factors deemphasized in Kelly’s account. Even before Mao’s death, the CCP largely recognized the need for change: Though the Soviet model had provided China with absolute gains in GDP, the economy was plagued by lagging living

standards and widespread poverty, and it became impossible to ignore the stories of peasants fleeing to Hong Kong. With the political reinstatement of Deng and Chen in the late 1970s, the state committed itself to a pragmatic, nonideological approach to economic growth. “Not changing was not a possibility,” Zhao Renwei, a major reformer, tells Weber in an interview. “We had to reform. But how to reform? This was not clear.”

To solve this question, Chinese economists first turned their focus to Eastern European thinkers, who shared their Marxist and Stalinist vocabulary, and then to European and US scholars steeped in the neoclassical tradition. They paid special attention to the émigrés from socialist countries who visited China: Włodzimierz Brus

from Poland (then at Oxford University), Ota Šik from Czechoslovakia (then at Switzerland’s University of St. Gallen), and János Kornai from Hungary (then at Harvard). They also organized meetings with World Bank officials, first in Zhejiang in 1982 and then on a cruise ship called the *M.S. Bashan* on the Yangzi River in 1985. Each voice stressed that Soviet- and Chinese-style price controls were structurally flawed and that it was necessary to overhaul the economy by embracing market prices.

China, it appeared, was heading toward “package reform.” That is, until a generation of young intellectuals began to advocate for partly retaining the structure of price control. Born between 1940 and 1960, these reformers shared the experience of living and working in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. They were acutely sensitive to the problems of collectivism but also, more broadly, to the “agrarian question” of how to raise the material standards of the peasantry. They were kindred spirits, Weber suggests, with older party members born at the turn of the century, whose formative experiences came from the guerrilla bases in Yan’an in the north. “Those who had spent many years in a poor village,” Weber writes, “had become accustomed to living among the peasants, and they were different from their younger classmates or those who had remained in the cities.”

For these young thinkers, China need-

## See the Tail That Wags the Dog

See the tail that wags the dog.  
Language is speaking the man.  
Look, the shovel is making a hole in the gravedigger!  
Brushes paint artists into the walls!  
The hip is wagging the dancer, see?  
That oar is rowing every person in the boat.  
Don’t you see it? Here is a head that thinks a man into a man.

LUDMILA KHERSONSKY

(Translated by Katie Farris and Ilya Kaminsky)

ed to follow a mixed economic path—moving toward decollectivization but still controlling prices for essential industrial sectors. As Wang Xiaoqiang, one of the rural reformers, vividly explains to Weber, many consumer goods—such as watches, bicycles, radios, and TVs—were overvalued at the time, but market competition would naturally tame their prices. The real problem lay with state-supplied capital goods and raw materials—timber, cement, chemicals, coal, iron ore, fertilizer—whose prices were too low. Because these items were used across all downstream industries, neoliberal package reforms would amplify demand and send their prices shooting up. Unless they were regulated, higher prices would have severe “ripple effects,” inducing a “chain reaction” of runaway inflation reminiscent of World War II.

The young intellectuals’ argument won the day in 1984, convincing Zhao Ziyang to formalize the dual-track system. The state would gradually liberalize nonessential goods at the margins but

retain power over the essentials in the socialist industrial core: It would control the “heavy” but release the “light.”

Over the next two years, however, calls for package reform grew even louder. Wu Jinglian, currently a member of the People’s Political Consultative Conference, was one of the strongest voices, promoting the work of Kornai and serving as China’s link, Weber writes, to a “transnational network transcending the Cold War divide” that served as “the breeding ground for neoliberalism in Eastern Europe.” For a brief period, it appeared Zhao might reconsider Wu and Kornai’s push for overnight liberalization and market correction, privately remarking in March 1986 that “package reform is superior to reform by individual measures.” But the rural reformers once again prevailed. The economist Li Yining, one of the veterans of the countryside, argued publicly that package reform assumed perfect competition and information, flexible prices, and elastic supplies, none of which existed in China or could be

created in one fell swoop. The problem was not the misalignment of planned and natural prices but the underdevelopment of China’s enterprises. Only the continued development of heavy industry could alleviate excess demand.

**I**t is instructive to compare Weber’s analysis with a similar treatment by Julian Gewirtz, currently the director for China in President Biden’s National Security Council. In his recent book *Unlikely Partners: Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China*, Gewirtz tackled the same liberalization debates of the 1980s but framed them as a story of reformers overcoming conservatives and cosmopolitan thinkers conquering nativism. Weber’s book complicates this tale of globalization’s inevitability by foregrounding how, in fact, these 1980s debates yielded trenchant criticisms of neoliberal thought.

Ultimately, both package and rural reformers agreed on the need for a mar-

## Hannah Is Never Only Hannah

Please get that I am the trying  
breeze going through the really  
great great great world yes yes.

Please get that I am the drowning  
helpful freedom of the storm yes  
yes. Please get that I am the very

hot great great great sun yes yes.  
Please get that I am the great  
great great great ice that gives

you the freeze that you need  
to get to melt into nothing yes  
yes yes yes. Please get that I

am the sky great great great blue  
nothing yes yes. Please get that  
I am the grownd great great great

place helping you helping you  
stand in grateful helpful helpful  
helpful kissing her her her her

yes. Please get that you and I  
greet the great great life from this  
place of great great kissing life

life life life yes yes yes. Please  
get that you are great form great  
formless helping kissing kissing

great knowing the great great  
great helpful kissing the trying  
yes yes. Please get that helpful

loving thinking you help just help  
kissing helpful loving great great  
great world turn upside down yes

yes. Please get that you help me  
by helping me turn upside down  
too yes yes yes. Please get that

great great helpful kissing people  
need to get that great helpful kissing  
is turning kissing upside down yes

yes. Please get that helpful kissing  
just needs to be gathered into this  
helpful kissing trying hell of this life

to go forward to help me Hannah  
Hannah Hannah yes yes. Please  
get that you need loving kissing

to make you like me yes yes.  
Please get that the kissing must  
be great knotting of you me great

us together in this hell yes yes yes.  
Please get that you kiss me helping  
me kiss you yes yes.

HANNAH EMERSON



ket system, and both were receptive to ideas from around the world. The real disagreement, Weber notes, turned on some fundamental questions about social inquiry and the underlying human values of economics. The starting premise for neoliberals was the existence of a well-functioning market, expressed through the movement of prices. Through complex calculations, they hoped to “get the prices right” and fully unleash the market’s forces. By contrast, the rural reformers stressed China’s historical and regional differences, prioritizing field-work surveys, empirical evidence, and hypothesis testing. They disagreed that economic life could be reduced to market activities, consistently drawing distinctions both against and within the realm of production, between agriculture and light industry versus heavy industry. Goods from across these sectors may have shared a knowable underlying market value, but that did not guarantee they would behave similarly. The industrial core for energy, steel, and chemicals was decades old, designed to function in a planned economy. It was ill-suited for competition, suffering from inescapable material constraints such as older technology and unintegrated supply chains. Higher demand would not induce discipline but instead overwhelm the system.

The rural reformers, in my view, were also issuing a warning. Although economic figures were abstracted from concrete realities, material crises could still arise in capitalist economies, short-circuiting the most elegant models. Whereas market exchange takes what is solid and melts it into air, it is in the realm of production, from agriculture to industry, that stubborn materialisms persist. It seems the rural reformers were unusual among their generation in continually bringing attention back to the hidden abode of production, less concerned with developing a perfect marketplace than in the project of reindustrialization. “The answer does not lie in books or in other countries’ models,” Chen Yizi, one of the rural reformers, put it. “Only through practice can we find the best way to build a socialist country with Chinese characteristics.” They took this view for a variety of reasons, Weber implies: intimate familiarity with the hardships of the countryside, firsthand experience with collective agricultural labor, and fluency in the classics of Marxism, from Lenin to

Stalin to Mao, in contradistinction to the neoclassical science that enamored Wu Jinglian and the proponents of package reform. Ultimately, though Weber writes about the challenge to neoliberal idealism from the standpoint of the practical, the rural reformers also presented a provocative intellectual challenge from socialist economics itself as a formidable tradition of thought.

Still, Weber’s story concludes with a profound sense of pathos. In the summer of 1989, Chinese leaders violently disagreed over the protests in Tiananmen Square, and splits within the party resulted in the imprisonment or exile, to varying degrees, of Zhao Ziyang and reformers Chen Yizi and Wang Xiaoliang, erasing their legacies. In the absence of a counterweight, Chinese leaders in the coming decades would pursue more market-driven policies resembling neoliberal price reforms.

Indeed, Weber initially presents the economic debates of the 1980s as political in nature and revolving around questions of power in society. But it is also fair to ask broader questions—not directly addressed by Weber—about how the rural reformers would have diverged from subsequent policies of social commodification, such as the precaritization of factory workers, the explosion of rural labor migration, and the privatization of rural industry. What she does make clear is that the mixed state capitalist economy, whose blueprint was forged in the 1980s, has remained intact in spite of appearances. Just last year, Xi Jinping signaled that the state-owned enterprises at the core of the Chinese economy would have a larger role than under previous regimes, both to manage the ongoing pandemic and its economic fallout and to steer the country into a “V-shaped recovery.”

The rural reformers may have averted the disaster of shock therapy, then, but the economy they saved is unlike the one they envisioned. The China of today is not the product of any single party model, whether Maoist or neoliberal, but an unintentional hybrid of diverse, contending historical forces.



elly and Weber present two plausible stories about China’s economic rise in the late 20th century. In one, China smoothly integrated into the world market by tapping into older experiments with coastal

trade and international diplomacy. In the other, state officials avoided the fate of Russia’s shock therapy, and even the 1997 Asian crisis, precisely by restricting the influence of an ascendant, universalizing economic orthodoxy that prioritized market interest over material well-being and industrial development. Both stories provide valuable insights into the China we know today, reflecting the multifaceted character of the world’s second-largest economy, one that draws its strengths from a mixture of market competition and avowedly illiberal state power.

Weber writes that reformers in China successfully diverged from the national neoliberal ideal, but this is not to deny that the rise of China is central to the story of the global neoliberal era. Not long ago, it was possible to narrate the history of neoliberalism by reducing it to the ideology of a handful of economists in Chicago and Vienna, who successfully disseminated their ideas to the rest of the world. Since then, new scholarship has broadened this inquiry beyond the “West” to include synchronous patterns unfolding in the “rest”: development projects in Latin America, export-processing zones in Asia, and offshore tax havens in postcolonial territories. Similarly, if China’s position as an economic power has pushed Sinologists to now pay greater attention to global history, then, likewise, scholars of North Atlantic capitalism will find it increasingly unavoidable to take the study of China more seriously. The flip side of the extreme financialization of economic life in Euro-America, it seems to me, was the state-led industrialization of East Asia.

If earlier notions that China would assimilate to a US-led world order have proved to be wishful thinking, then it should be vitally important to reexamine what, exactly, the socialist project meant in the 20th century. No doubt China has been thoroughly reintegrated into the global economy after a long hiatus, but this was not a unilateral movement. For over half a century, policy-makers and economic thinkers in China—from Mao to Deng, spanning both rural and package reformers—studied globally ascendant market ideas and practices, assimilating some but not others into their own traditions of Chinese socialism, folding them into their own specific universe of meaning.



# Downfall

Joel Coen's *Macbeth*

BY ERIN SCHWARTZ

**T**HEATER REQUIRES A PARTICULAR KIND OF FAITH IN THE audience, given the medium's abstract and particular qualities: A scrim stands in for a vista, plywood for castle walls, the performance of emotion for the emotion itself. In film, this relationship tends to be more circumscribed, the world it creates both more lavishly real and less dependent on its audience's belief for its effect. Joel Coen's adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, starring Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand as the scheming couple, chooses to adopt theater's set of challenges within the filmic frame. In a recent Q&A, Coen said that his "ambition" for *Macbeth* was to "keep the feel of it being a play." The film's production design was inspired in part by the work of the English set designer and theorist Edward Gordon Craig, the creator of the translucent folding screens and stark, diagonal beams of light in Stanislavsky's avant-garde 1911

Moscow Art Theatre production of *Hamlet*. Coen cites Craig with providing the idea, influential to the film, that staging Shakespeare "wasn't about realism in any way. It was about...embracing it as a dream."

Coen's *Macbeth* is indeed theatrical and oneiric. Designed by Stefan Decant and shot in black and white by the cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel, it takes place against landscapes composed of a few elements—sand, rock,

scrub—arranged in a shallow depth of field, foreshortened by translucent smoke and mist. Wild, overgrown settings have a man-made symmetry, and the film's palace intrigue plays out in a sparsely decorated architecture of vaulting arcades, towers, and scaffolding that bisect courtyards into geometries of light and shadow. The lighting cues evoke the theater: Banquo performs a soliloquy in the glare of a circular spotlight; silhouettes create the impression of a feast behind an illuminated window. In the post-*Lord of the Rings* era, Coen's *Macbeth* is the rare film dealing with medieval combat that uses just a group of actors to suggest an army; the eeriness of the three witches comes from fantastically creepy birdlike movements by the veteran actor Kathryn Hunter rather than special effects. *Macbeth*'s final duel with Macduff takes place on an angular parapet wreathed in mist, as if the scene were playing out on a plane above the terrestrial battle below.

These choices make *Macbeth* an incredibly beautiful film: There is nothing here that allows viewers to take the fabrications of the story for granted, no sweeping drone shots of moorlands or extras in historically accurate peasant garb to lend the significance of verisimilitude to a battle over Scottish monarchical succession. There's no mediating narrative device either, no historical analogy made by transposing the bard's play to an anachronistic but more familiar setting, like 1990s Los Angeles or 2000s New York. The focus is on the play—on finding the particular meaning within this set of abstractions—which makes its protagonists' downfall all the more acute.

**C**oen's adaptation focuses primarily on the relationship between the play's title character and his spouse, a couple who, despite their unified political interests, diverge in their tactics as Macbeth's paranoia overwhelms his strategic sensibility. Washington and McDormand are cast as an older couple—Shakespeare's verse is slightly altered to indicate that they are past their reproductive years—which creates a sense of battle-tested concordance. One has the impression that their conspiracy is neither's first political plot, nor the first time Lady Macbeth has smuggled a handful of daggers around the

castle. After Macbeth relays the witches' prophecy that he will become the king of Scotland, the speed and pragmatism with which McDormand's Lady Macbeth devises a plan to accomplish this seems informed by experience, past attempts and disappointments, as does her frustration with Macbeth's errors in implementing it.

The play's central couple share many forms of hubris, but in Coen's film he transforms them into something new. Macbeth becomes a man trying to speedrun a prophecy, a term from video game culture that refers to completing a list of objectives as quickly as possible, regardless of other considerations. Becoming the king, eliminating rivals, and keeping the throne are ends unto themselves, which Macbeth, coached by his wife, pursues with reckless urgency. Lady Macbeth is ready to commit regicide from the moment she receives her husband's letter; when the ghost of Banquo, a potential rival that Macbeth has had assassinated, haunts him during a feast, the guests who witness the scene are sent away before they can even eat dinner. When Macduff flees to England, fearing an assassination attempt, Washington's Macbeth, energized by his frustration, resolves to act more quickly and ignore any further checks on his instincts: "From this moment, / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand. And even now, / To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done."

Coen presents this narrow-visioned haste as Macbeth's downfall. Macbeth misapprehends the prophecy's end point for its substance, and once he becomes king, he doesn't know what to do; he has no real allies, no plans to enact beyond plotting. His singular focus on obtaining the crown ensures that he will fail to keep it. In the spareness of the world Coen creates, there is little context for why Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want the monarchy, other than vague gestures at prestige and wealth: After being crowned, Macbeth appears on a reasonably sized throne, wearing a narrow circlet and a cloak unembellished with jewels or fur. He shows up late to his one state dinner; there is little hedonism or material excess on display. The pair have no children to inherit the throne, and adopting children doesn't figure into their plot. What, then,

motivates their single-minded pursuit?

Quests for power that run on instinct and id feel relevant to contemporary politics, and it is perhaps a boon for Coen's *Macbeth* that it premiered after the end of the Trump administration, when comparisons to White House intrigue would have been easy and obvious. Watching it now, the film's commentary on the workings of power seems broader. *Macbeth* is often characterized as the story of a couple fatally blinded by their desire for influ-

**Quests for power that run on instinct and id feel relevant to contemporary politics.**

ence, and in Coen's version, power itself functions as an abstract goal, poorly understood by those who pursue it. It is, fundamentally, the ability to make things happen, one that works more effectively when the force behind it is threatened rather than actualized. A monarch who must frequently call on the might of the state to enforce his will—as with Macbeth, fighting a losing battle against rival claimants—will exhaust his resources, and his rule will fail.

In a 2017 lecture on kinship in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, Judith Butler describes a type of relationship that gains its significance in part from an idealization that it is permanent and inviolable, which renders it "invariably marked or haunted by the possibility of failing or fading." "Ghosts are always populating kin relations, and tragedy is one of the places where we see that most clearly," Butler notes. I returned to this idea of a bond held so strongly that it creates the conditions for its own collapse while watching *Macbeth*, both in terms of the central couple's destruction—Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are an unwavering pair until their shared plot results in both of their deaths—as well as their goal. Attaining the crown would give Macbeth the kind of power that makes him unassailable, so he kills the king to get it. To gain a position of idealized security, he first has to violate it, undermining the efficacy of that ideal when he possesses it himself.

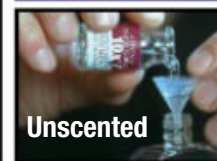
*Macbeth* was written at a time when the idea of a monarch's infallibility was both sacrosanct and vulnerable. Some historians believe the play references the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, a conspiracy to assassinate the Protestant King James I by blowing up Parliament, and its themes of self-destructive comeup-

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pance following the murder of a king reflect Shakespeare's royal patronage and the pragmatic value in creating works that shore up the taboo on regicide. That taboo did not stand: Some four decades later, in the English Civil War, King Charles I was executed. (Eighteen years before the Gunpowder Plot, Mary, Queen of Scots—the mother of James I—had been executed; Jane Grey, who was queen for nine days, was executed in 1554.) Monarchs cannot be killed, it seems, until they can.

The sparseness and symbolism of Coen's film brings the illusory nature of power into even sharper focus. The effects power has in the world are real—in *Macbeth*, it results in a great many deaths—but the thing itself is a contradiction, one that he and Lady Macbeth miss in their rush to claim the throne. Power cannot be all it promises, especially absolute power. It is constituted of the belief of those who participate in its workings; it contains the possibility of failure if that belief is not maintained—and belief, in *Macbeth*, is incredibly fragile.

# Letters



lexis Grenell's January 24/31 column "Goysplaining" provoked a heated response from readers. A selection follows, but for a more complete account, go to: [thenation.com/letters-goysplaining](http://thenation.com/letters-goysplaining)

Thank you, Alexis Grenell, for your passionate article "Goysplaining" [Jan. 24/31]. For too long, Jews have had to weigh their commitment to progressive causes and groups against the strong possibility that their Jewish faith and ethnic identity would be attacked. Call it what it is: anti-Semitism. With the news of the terrorist attack against the little synagogue in Colleyville, Tex., perhaps it is high time for progressive groups to listen to what Ms. Grenell is saying.

RABBI GERRY WALTER  
CINCINNATI

I was all set to dissect the anti-BDS tirade by Alexis Grenell in your January 24/31 issue. But today I'm too shaken and broken-hearted from seeing the rubble of the Salhiya family home in Sheikh Jarrah, which was demolished by Israeli forces yesterday morning at 3 AM. Instead, I will share three observations. First, Grenell deploys considerable energy pathologizing supporters of Palestinian rights and proscribing our advocacy efforts. Surely if she is gifted a platform to trash tactics aimed at securing justice for Palestinians, she could spare a moment to let us know what form of persuasion she finds acceptable. Only the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement has caught Israel's attention; but perhaps that's the point. Second, Grenell is

curiously silent on the de facto BDS of Palestinians. It seems safe to conclude that denying visas to Palestinian athletes, academics, and artists, criminalising Palestinian human rights organisations, and raiding Palestinian universities are A-OK with her. Finally, I don't know of another instance in modern history in which the motives of advocates for justice were examined so forensically, nor the character of those advocates smeared with such unremitting ferocity, as supporters of the Palestinian cause. Instead of maligning pro-Palestine leftists, perhaps Grenell might ask herself why she is incapable of seeing Palestinians as fully human, and not merely a projection of her own racist anxiety.

JULIANA FARHA  
LONDON

As soon as I read the first sentence of this apologia for mainstream Zionism, I recognized a familiar and egregious fallacy in Grenell's thinking: her wholesale reduction of Jews to a monolith. It was clear where this was going when she began right out of the gate by rekindling the feminist controversy over the Women's March from three years ago and the accusations of anti-Semitism against its leaders, in particular Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian, and the African American feminist Tamika Mallory. Grenell writes as if the charges of anti-Semitism were unanimously embraced by Jewish

feminists, or even as if all Jews agree on what counts as anti-Semitism. But I and many of my Jewish feminist counterparts publicly disagreed at the time. One could argue that this kind of homogenization is itself an age-old form of anti-Semitism.

Grenell parenthetically acknowledges that many American Jews reject the equation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism and do support BDS, but the main direction of her piece is to convey the opposite: that anti-Zionists don't know our own history and that condemning Israel as an apartheid and settler colonial state is anti-Semitic. Grenell's rant against the critique of Representative Jamaal Bowman by the Democratic Socialists of America follows the same pattern of erasing dissenting—and particularly anti-Zionist—Jewish and feminist voices. Many of us may deplore Bowman's failure to fully support Palestinian justice and BDS but think it's crucial for other reasons to keep him in office.

I suggest that if Grenell wants to stop trying to speak for all Jews and to practice what she preaches, she might educate herself about anti-Zionism and its long, vibrant history among Jews in Europe, the US, and even Israel. She could start by reading the review of the new Amnesty International report in *The Nation* ["Amnesty's Echo," by Omar Barghouti and Stefanie Fox, page 6].

ROSALIND PETCHESKY  
Distinguished Professor  
Emerita of Political Science,  
Hunter College and the Graduate  
Center, City University of New York

Grenell is correct that there are currents in DSA who weaponized support for BDS to attack Bowman and by implication DSA's electoral strategy as well as J Street's. However, DSA's National Political Committee, reflecting the majority of the membership, rejected that sectarian posture. Conflict within a big-tent organization is inevitable and messy.

PAUL GARVER

Grenell states in her piece that "DSA's anti-Israel position is often thoughtless, self-righteous, and anti-Semitic," presumably because of its support for BDS. BDS is a call for political help to the world at large that comes from the Palestinian people *themselves*. To deny the validity of BDS is to effectively deny that colonized peoples are capable of any understanding of their own political situation. It denies the very political agency of Palestinians and arrogantly presumes to speak for them, as Washington and Tel Aviv (and before them, London) have done since the beginning of the military colonial project of the Nakba.

TIMOTHY WONG  
BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA

No progressive would say that the Holocaust justifies oppression such as bombing the world's largest outdoor prison (Gaza) or the eviction of Palestinians from homes their families have lived in for generations, even if it helps explain the desire for a Jewish homeland. The military situation is a reason for, not against, taking action against Israel, which receives more military aid from the United States than any

other country (\$3.8 billion annually) and whose government continues to seize Palestinian land, to maintain an apartheid wall, and to authorize Jewish-only settlements in violation of international law, making it clear that they prefer war over a two-state solution or any other peace agreement.

Grenell falls into precisely the trap that the Israeli government has set for us all: mistakenly equating the nation of Israel with Jews worldwide, and thus branding opposition to Israeli policy as anti-Semitic. So we're left with Jews in this country taking criticism of Israel as an attack on "the Jewish people," which is precisely the fallacious conflation of the two that Grenell bases all this on. In fact, the term *Am Yisrael* means "the Jewish people," not "the nation of Israel," as Grenell says it does. The nation of Israel did not exist when that term became part of Jewish liturgy; the Hebrew word for "nation" is *goy*. This misdefinition of the Jewish people not only ignores the Jews in leadership positions in progressive organizations such as DSA that Grenell focuses on but also overlooks the rapid growth (especially among young people) of progressive Jewish organizations that support BDS, such as Jewish Voice for Peace (of which I am a member) and If Not Now. These groups and individuals are not excluded from the conversation about Israel and BDS, as the article suggests; they're just excluded from the article.

CLYDE LELAND  
BERKELEY, CALIF.

It is mistaken to position Israel's oppression of Palestinians as an issue of emotional harm to American Jews; support for Palestinians should be argued on the merits, not on whether it hurts the feelings of American Jews.

American Jews may get

upset when Israel's apartheid regime is condemned in leftist political circles, but that is not a reason not to do so. Ongoing efforts to curtail Palestinian solidarity on the left because of how it makes American Zionist Jews feel is a transparent and cynical effort to avoid the substance of this debate. Weaponizing anti-Semitism in this way (e.g., citing the Tree of Life shooting in a column about Israel/Palestine) is an attempt to shift the terms of the debate, and should be rejected.

ANDY RATTO  
BROOKLYN, N.Y.

Do most American Jews really cringe like frightened mice when hearing the word "boycott," thereby drinking the Anti-Defamation League's Kool-Aid? The first thing that comes to mind, as a son of Jewish Holocaust survivors, is the Jewish boycott of Nazi Germany. That was the boycott that triggered the retaliatory Nazi boycott of German Jewish businesses. The Jewish boycott was broken with the help of the senior Zionist leadership of the Yishuv, which formulated the infamous Transfer Agreement, propping up an economically vulnerable Nazi regime.

Ms. Grenell seems unaware of a recent poll taken by the Jewish Electorate Institute that showed that 25 percent of American Jews believe Israel to be an apartheid state. The membership of my own organization, Social Democrats USA, has tripled since 2017, when we endorsed BDS—not as anti-Zionists but as Democratic Zionists, opposed to the apartheid of State Zionism and supportive of a genuine two-state option.

SHELDON RANZ  
Director of Special Projects,  
Social Democrats USA  
BROOKLYN, N.Y.

Grenell's commentary resonated with me. As a human rights and social justice researcher

and advocate, I frequently find that the human rights realities, concerns, and lived experiences of discrimination and persecution faced by Jewish people both currently and historically are neglected, downplayed, and denied by many individuals and institutions who self-identify with the left.

There is no sound moral basis for this lack of solidarity with and abandonment of Jewish people, their human rights, welfare, freedom, and access to justice and equality. It is made all the more painful and harmful at this particularly precarious and dangerous time for so many minorities, including Jews, as anti-Jewish bigotry and violence continue to rise in the United States, Canada, and globally. An urgent course correction by the left and a concurrent effort to reflect upon and address the ideological origins of left-wing anti-Jewish prejudice and hostility are needed. The harm they have caused and continue to cause must be repaired.

NOAM SCHIMMEL  
Lecturer, International  
and Area Studies,  
University of California, Berkeley

🗨️ Grenell says absolutely nothing about the illegal settlements or the disproportionate response against the Palestinians whenever there is a flare-up of violence. BDS is nonviolent protest, yet even that she opposes. She has the audacity to say that the left alienates Jews. Well, as a very left-leaning Jew, I can say that it's not the left that alienates me, but people like her that think that all Jews must accept what Israel is doing because they are fellow Jews.

MIRIAM APPLEBAUM

I would like to commend Dave Zirin for taking time from his sportswriting to respond to Grenell's terribly wrong-headed diatribe against the pro-Palestinian left ["How

the Democratic Party Alienates Young Jews: A Reply to Alexis Grenell," *TheNation.com*, Jan. 27]. In fact, Grenell's piece was not only an attack on the pro-Palestinian left, it was also an attack on Palestinians themselves and their history, of which Grenell seems unable to go beyond mainstream media tropes. Her article is replete with innuendos and falsehoods that come right out of the AIPAC playbook.

Take, for example, her suggestion that the "overwhelming opposition to BDS among American Jewry" is partly the result of "a public and oft-stated goal of many of Israel's neighboring countries to annihilate the Jewish state." The latter is a claim straight from the Zionist and right-wing canon, using the most bombastic of terms ("annihilate"). But which countries is she referring to? Is the threat to annihilate coming from Lebanon? From Syria? From Jordan? From Egypt? All of these countries have been ruled for at least half a century by dysfunctional, unpopular governments or military dictatorships, which actually fear or bow to Israel's military might and the US behind it, and are perennially more concerned about their own internal problems than about Israel.

By Grenell's reckoning, a two-state solution is Zionism's "compromise" offer, because it will parcel out small pieces to the Palestinians inside the Zionist claim of a historical homeland. The implication is that Palestinians should be grateful and thank their oppressors for being offered walled-off portions of land—i.e., two or three Bantustan enclaves, which are then called a state—instead of being thrown out completely. How generous!

ASSAF KFOURY  
BROOKLINE, MASS.

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IN MEMORIAM/ERIC ALTERMAN

# Todd Gitlin (1943–2022)

*The writer and activist combined intellectual complexity and honesty with a lifelong commitment to liberal humanist values.*

**O** MET TODD GITLIN THE WEEKEND OF OCTOBER 17, 1987. It was the beginning of what would become a decades-long “beautiful friendship.” (We shared a favorite movie in *Casablanca*.) I can pin down the exact date because our meeting took place at the Second Thoughts Conference, where apostate liberals and New Leftists gathered at the Grand Hyatt hotel in Washington, D.C., to denounce their former selves and embrace the new right. Around that time, Ronald Reagan’s Iran-contra plot had been revealed and the stock market had its largest single drop since 1929. The news signaled the end of the Reaganite hegemony that these folks had come to celebrate.

I was a cub reporter, there for *Mother Jones*, but Todd was there as a star. He was a former president of Students for a Democratic Society and had recently published his masterful history *The Sixties*. The conference’s hosts badly wanted his endorsement. Todd did them the courtesy of taking them seriously. This was more than these clowns deserved, but it was a principle that Todd lived by. A person could come up to him and pick an argument over Antonio Gramsci or Theodor Adorno, and Todd would stop and consider what was being said and thoughtfully reply. Speaking from the audience, Todd proceeded to make the kind of subtle arguments about the New Left’s mixed legacy that the conference’s speakers had refused to see. His brief performance impressed me as much with its cool, calm delivery as it did with its erudition.

For the first few years of our friendship, I played the role of Todd’s student. I shared a dinner with him and the editor and historian Michael Kazin in 1993 at San Francisco’s venerable Fior d’Italia, where Todd explained to us that we should take Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* seriously, based on Todd’s study of Hegel and Alexandre Kojève, the French Hegelian philosopher upon whom Fukuyama based his much-misunderstood argument. Here again was Todd at his best. He did not dismiss what many on the left thought was just a right-wing punditocracy talking point. Instead, he located Fukuyama’s thesis in the history of thought and its relationship to politics. I have tried to emulate this quality ever since.

Todd was no less devoted to activism and organizing than he was to scholarship. This was harder than it looks. To be an honest intellectual, as I once heard Susan Sontag—another friend and

fan of Todd’s—say, is to make distinctions. To be a successful activist, however, requires the elision of such distinctions in the name of movement unity. By the time he died on February 5, at 79, Todd was a veteran of countless movements. He spoke in classrooms and at cocktail parties, rallies, and dinners, just as he wrote for scholarly publications, op-ed pages, obscure political websites, underground zines, student newspapers, and, on occasion, *The Nation*. He also published books of sociology, history, current events, and advice to young activists, as well as poetry and fiction. Todd had something to say about almost everything, and as Kazin told *The New York Times*, he sometimes made his points rather testily. But in all these venues, he said the same things. He refused to bastardize his views to please an audience. He made critical distinctions

at rallies and spoke from his heart in graduate seminars. Whether the cause was reviving the 1930s’ labor/intellectual alliance; pressuring his alma mater, Harvard, to divest from fossil fuels; or opposing the academic Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement aimed at Israel, Todd told his complicated truth.

Todd’s impact is larger than can be documented here.

He deserves to be remembered not only for his writings on the 1960s but for his pioneering media criticism and early critique of academic and left-wing identity politics. But I would argue that his primary legacy rests in his ability to combine intellectual complexity and honesty with a lifelong commitment to liberal humanist values, applying these to whatever malady we faced at the time. That and his gift for friendship. Humphrey Bogart’s Rick Blaine was a little off when he said that “the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.” Little problems mattered to Todd, just as big ones did. And as his friends, admirers, and even his adversaries learned during Todd’s 60-some years of activism and argument, you could count on him whenever you wanted answers about either.



➤ **Telling his truth:** Gitlin never bastardized his political views to please an audience.



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